



FALL | Soil

Soil + Straw: Keeping Frost at Bay

Summary:

As the weather turns cooler we often have to put on a light jacket to keep warm. Our gardens are no different. Cold nights can mean frosty plants that still have a bit of life left. We might not have coats for our plants, but we can keep them protected with straw.

Before Visiting the Garden:

Gather: Straw (most garden centers will carry this in the fall), a hand rake, drinking straws

Explore: “Haystack at Sunset 1891” by Claude Monet: Do you think straw and hay are the same? What season do you think it is in this picture?

Read: *The Three Little Pigs, An Architectural Tale* by Steven Guarnaccia: Which house do you think is the one made of straw?

In the Garden:

One of our most important jobs in fall is to protect the last little plants still growing and prepare the soil for spring by cleaning up the garden beds. The better care we take of them in fall, spring chores will be easier. One important material we use in fall garden tending is straw.

Observations:

- Compare the conventional straws and garden straws you brought to the garden.
- What are the similarities? What are the differences?
- Before we put our straw on the garden, we need to make sure the area around our plants is clean.
- Do you see any debris, like old leaves, weeds or sticks that could be raked up?
- How many buckets of garden waste can you fill?

Questions to Explore:

- What do you do to keep warm when the weather starts to get cooler?
- Do you notice animals doing anything special in the fall? Can you spot a squirrel’s nest?
- How do you think animals and plants change in winter? (thicker coats, insulating with leaves, plants going dormant, etc.)

Now that we have cleaned up around our plants, we can put straw down to protect them from frost and to keep the ground cozy. Straw can also be used throughout the year to protect plants. If you live in an area that doesn’t get much water, straw can help keep moisture in the soil and the ground cool—it’s multi-purpose!

Activity:

1. Take your straw and place it around the base of the shorter plants that you want to protect from cool weather (tall plants will not benefit from straw and might need something more substantial).
2. Don’t bury the plant but do make sure the soil is well covered in a few inches of straw. You can sprinkle some straw on top to keep frost off the leaves. Keeping plants free of the first few fall frosts can extend our growing season and bring us a few more weeks of delicious fresh veggies.

Beyond the Garden | Splatter Painting with Straws:

Want to further explore the properties of a straw and exercise your mouth muscles? Grab a sturdy piece of paper, some tempera paint, and a straw. At the bottom of the page place a glob of dark paint. Blow the paint upwards to create a trunk for your tree. At the top of the page place some globs of red, orange, and/or yellow paint. Gently blow that paint around the page to create some fantastic fall foliage. Let dry and hang on your fridge!

Continue Exploring | Supporting Materials

Another fun use for straw, scarecrows! Check your local paper or city events calendar for scarecrow competitions in your area.

More activities: <http://www.kidsgardening.org/fall-activities>