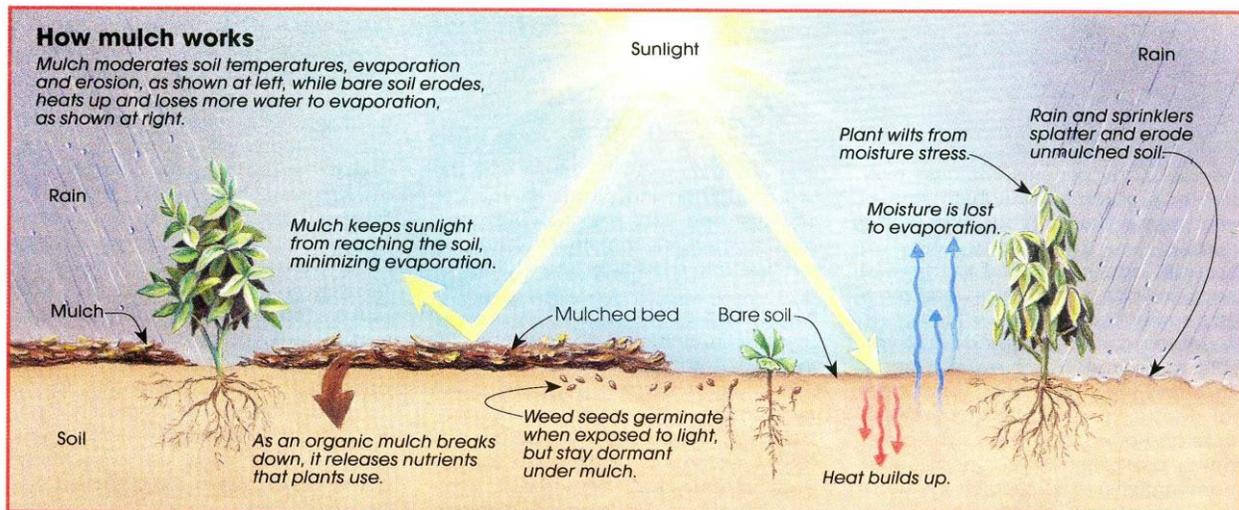


To Mulch or Not to Mulch



That's easy. Mulch! Mulch is a layer of material covering the soil to protect plants. Mulches can be organic matter that decompose and benefit the soil or inorganic, infertile material. Using mulch has many advantages such as:

- Helps prevent weeds from getting established, making maintenance easier.
- Keeps the soil moist and increases its water holding capacity.
- Slows water evaporation and diffuses the force of water to prevent runoff and erosion while allowing water to soak in.
- Protects plants from diseases that result when soil, containing plant pathogens, is splashed on leaves during heavy rains.
- Lessens plant damage by moderating winter and spring soil temperatures.
- Prevents the soil from heaving with frequent thawing and freezing.
- Prevents mower and string trimmer damage when used around trees.



Organic Mulches

Organic mulches are derived from animals or plants.

Advantages

Advantages of organic mulch are:

- Attracts earthworms and microorganisms whose by-products improve the texture of the soil.
- Feeds the soil by providing nutrients as it breaks down.
- Insulates the soil against extreme temperatures by keeping the soil warmer in the winter and cooler in the summer.
- Improves soil aeration and lessens compaction.
- Provides a cushion under ripening produce in the vegetable garden, keeping the produce off the soil.



Readily available organic mulches include:

- | | | |
|-------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|
| • Chipped pine bark | • Straw | • Chipped hardwood |
| • Shredded cypress bark | • Shredded leaves | • Cotton boll compost |
| • Newsprint | • Compost peat moss | • Cocoa bean hulls |
| • Grass clippings | • Pine needles | |

Disadvantages

Disadvantages of organic mulches are:

- Dry mulch burns. Care must be taken when discarding matches or cigarettes around mulched beds or plants.
- Wet clippings can produce a strong, disagreeable odor, generate heat that can injure plants, mat together and repel water rather than allowing it to penetrate. Ensure grass clippings are dry before using them. Also, if the grass was previously treated with a herbicide or fertilizer containing a herbicide, the herbicide may damage the plants.
- Low nitrogen mulches (for example, straw, wood chips, sawdust) can decrease the available nitrogen in the soil as the microorganisms decomposing the mulch pull nitrogen out of the soil and away from the plants. This can be prevented by amending the soil with material containing nitrogen, such as fertilizer or compost, prior to mulching.
- If not placed correctly, mulch can promote rodent, moisture and slug damage to plants and trees.
- If applied too early in the spring, the mulch will delay warming of the soil.
- Organic mulches usually must be re-applied yearly.

Inorganic Mulch

Inorganic mulch products do not decompose and are, more or less, permanent. Typical inorganic mulches include black plastic, landscape fabric, rock and recycled, shredded tires. Each of these products has advantages and disadvantages.

Black plastic or landscape fabric

Advantages

- Speeds up warming of soil in spring, allowing early planting and production of vegetables.
- Weeds are unable to grow under black plastic and landscape fabric. (Weeds are able to grow under clear plastic.)
- Conserves soil moisture.
- Works best around shrubs, trees or under a garden path—wherever you won't be digging and dividing.

Disadvantages

- Plastic does not “breathe” and can contribute to moisture and disease problems. Therefore, plastic is not recommended.
- Landscape fabric by itself is unattractive and should be covered with other material, usually organic mulch. As the organic mulch decomposes, weeds can grow in it and send roots through the fabric into the underlying soil. Removing these weeds disturbs the mulch and damages the landscape fabric.

Rock and shredded tires

Advantages

- Available in a wide variety of colors. Can be used creatively by itself.
- Weeds can grow through without damaging the mulch.

Disadvantages

- Rock can become excessively hot in the summer, causing plant damage.
- Weeding in rock can be hard on fingers.
- Toxic chemicals can leach out of the tire rubber.

Applying Mulch—Dos and Don'ts

Do
<p>✓ Do apply mulch in a 2 to 4-inch layer each spring after the soil has warmed up. With the exception of plants requiring additional mulching for winter protection (for example, roses, new plantings and other tender plants), a single application of mulch should be all that is required. Don't let mulch accumulate year after year. Keep the mulch layer at 2 to 4 inches.</p> <p>✓ Do surround trees with a 3 to 6-foot circle of mulch or as far out as the drip line. Spread the mulch in a thin layer near the trunk, deepening as you move further out.</p>

Don't
<p>✓ Don't mound the mulch like a volcano against tree trunks or stems of shrubs. Mounding limits air circulation and creates excessive moisture, increasing the risk of disease and encouraging insects and rodents.</p> <p>✓ Don't mulch over the crowns of plants. Keep mulch 1 to 2 inches away from the crown of a plant.</p> <p>✓ Don't use grass clippings treated with a broad-leaf weed control! These herbicides</p>

harm all broad-leaf plants, including shrubs, trees, perennials and annuals.

How Much Mulch Should You Buy?

To determine how much mulch to buy, measure the garden, multiply the length by the width and divide by 6. This is the number of cubic feet required to apply a 2-inch layer of mulch. A 2-cubic-foot bag of mulch will cover approximately 12 square feet 2 inches deep. A 3-cubic-foot bag will cover approximately 18 square feet.

Aesthetics

The type of mulch you decide to use in your landscape is based on a number of considerations—price, availability, ease of use and what appeals to you aesthetically. Organic mulches usually turn gray with age and provide a neutral background for plantings. Use colored mulches with care. These mulches can become the focal point of the garden and draw attention away from the plants. Some colors may even clash with the plantings!

Another consideration when choosing mulch . . . where will the mulch be applied? Not all mulches are appropriate for every landscape situation. Coarser, less elegant mulches are fine for use around trees, shrubs or to create pathways, but a more delicate, uniform and costly mulch may be appropriate for use around annuals and perennials.

In Conclusion . . .

As you can see, the advantages of mulching far outweigh the disadvantages. Mulch is attractive and benefits the garden by reducing the loss of soil moisture, moderating soil temperatures and inhibiting weed growth. And, if organic mulch is used, it will improve the soil structure and add nutrients as it decomposes. *So, mulch!*

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