

THE FACTS ABOUT MULCH

It's hard to believe something as simple as mulching can solve so many gardening problems and offer so many advantages. Mulching is a gardening practice that has been around for years, but we are just now beginning to fully understand and appreciate all it does for our plants. In fact, there are almost as many reasons to mulch as there are mulches.

What exactly is mulch? Mulch is simply any material used to cover the soil or plants.

Why mulch? Many mulches are aesthetically pleasing and can help showcase your plants. A good layer of mulch will help to conserve moisture and suppresses weed germination. Organic mulches can add nutrients and humus to the soil. Mulch can help stabilize soil, preventing erosion. You can minimize the spread of soil-borne diseases by mulching, which prevents splashing of soil up onto plant foliage. An adequate layer of organic mulch will also keep the soil temperatures more even.

Aren't there lots of different types of mulch? There are various types of organic and inorganic mulches. Some of the materials most commonly used for mulch are compost, grass clippings, shredded leaves, hay, straw, shredded wood, bark chips, pine needles, newspaper, various rocks and pebbles, plastic and weed fabrics. Each has its own pro's and con's and best uses.

What is meant by "organic" mulch? When referring to mulch, organic means those that are made of plant material. Mulches made of rock or plastic are considered inorganic.

I've heard rock mulches aren't good for plants. Is that true? Yes and no. Rock mulches compact soil, can gather and hold excessive heat and accumulating organic matter (leaves, seeds, etc.) can make it dirty. But lots of people like the looks of rock and it lasts forever. If you choose to mulch with rock, avoid using plastic as your weed barrier unless it is needed to keep the water away from the building foundation. Plastic will inhibit water and air circulation, making rock even more of a problem for plants.

How do I choose which mulch to use? What it is you want your mulch to accomplish? If looks are the primary consideration, choose the mulch you find most attractive. When mulching around annuals or perennials, use something made up of smaller pieces, such as shredded cypress or small pieces of bark. To show off the colors of blooms, use a dark mulch, such as shredded hardwood. To lighten up an area, you may want to use a light colored rock or shredded cypress. If you are mulching to help winterize your plants, use straw, hay or shredded leaves.

When should I apply the mulch? Most mulching can be done anytime during the growing season, generally the earlier the better. If you are mulching for winter protection, it is important to understand that you aren't trying to keep the soil warm-you are trying to keep it cold so that it won't thaw and freeze alternately. (Occasionally, mulch is used to keep soil warm later in the fall when something was planted late.)

Do I need to weed before I mulch? It really is best to clean the area of all weeds before mulching. If necessary, use an herbicide to help with the job. Roundup or Finale will kill weeds from their root system and only take a few days to work, but be careful not to get it on anything you don't want to kill.

How deeply should I apply mulch? Again, this varies according to what type of mulch you are using and why you are mulching. Most organic mulches are applied 2-4 inches thick. Rock mulches average 2-3 inches deep. Mulches applied for winterization are usually 4-6 inches deep.

Are weed barriers a good idea? Whenever possible, fabric weed barriers are an excellent idea. They aren't foolproof, but they greatly reduce weeds coming from below the barrier. Plastic is a less expensive alternative, but it greatly inhibits air and water flow. A weed barriers will not keep seeds from germinating on top of it.

Can I use Preen with a mulch? Preen, a pre-emergent herbicide, is a good alternative to weed barriers. It is important to weed thoroughly before using Preen, since its job is just to keep new weeds from germinating. It does not affect anything that already has leaves or a root system. Preen can be incorporated into the soil surface or sprinkled on top of mulches and gently watered in.

Is there any time I shouldn't mulch? There are times when mulch keeps the soil too wet. This can be a problem with plants that are sensitive to winter moisture. Young seedling plants can be smothered by too much mulch. Some woody mulches, such as raw wood chips or sawdust, can draw nitrogen from the soil. You can compensate for this by using a water soluble fertilizer while the mulch is still fresh. And sometimes rodents are attracted to mulches, burrowing around looking for insects and tender plants to nibble on. If any of these problems occur, let us know and we will help you figure out how to manage the problem.