

Mulching

Mulching is one of the most important ways to maintain healthy garden plants. Mulch is any material applied to the soil surface for protection or improvement of the area covered. Mulching is really nature's idea. Nature produces large quantities of mulch all the time with fallen leaves, needles, twigs, pieces of bark, spent flower blossoms, fallen fruit and other organic material.

Benefits of Mulching

When applied correctly, mulch has the following beneficial effects on plants and soil:

- Mulches prevent loss of water from the soil by evaporation.
- Mulches reduce the growth of weeds, when the mulch material itself is weed-free and applied deeply enough to prevent weed germination or to smother existing weeds.
- Mulches keep the soil cooler in the summer and warmer in the winter, thus maintaining a more even soil temperature.
- Mulches prevent soil splashing, which not only stops erosion but keeps soil-borne diseases from splashing up onto the plants.
- Organic mulches can improve the soil structure. As the mulch decays, the material becomes topsoil. Decaying mulch also adds nutrients to the soil.
- Mulches prevent crusting of the soil surface, thus improving the absorption and movement of water into the soil.
- Mulches prevent the trunks of trees and shrubs from damage by lawn equipment.
- Mulches help prevent soil compaction.
- Mulches can add to the beauty of the landscape by providing a cover of uniform colour and interesting texture to the surface.

Types of Mulches

There are basically two types of mulches: organic and inorganic. Both types may have their place in the garden. An organic mulch is made of natural substances such as bark, wood chips, leaves, pine needles, or grass clippings. Organic mulches attract insects, slugs and the birds that eat them. They decompose over time and need to be replaced. Inorganic mulches, such as black matting, gravel, pebbles, black plastic and landscape fabrics do not decompose. However they can harbour slugs and also frogs (which may eat the slugs!)

Mulch Materials

Organic Mulch Materials

Your garden waste can be recycled as mulch with the advantage of retaining the nutrients found in these organic materials.

Grass Clippings

The best use for grass clippings is to leave them on the lawn. Grass clippings will decompose rapidly, adding nutrients back into the soil. A two-inch layer of grass clippings provides weed control if they are not full of weed seeds. Use grass early in the season before seeds form. It is best to build up the layer gradually using dry grass, not fresh clippings, to prevent the formation of a solid mat. Be careful not to use clippings from lawns that have been treated with herbicides.

Hay and Straw

Never use hay for mulch since it contains too many weed seeds. Straw is not very ornamental and is best for a vegetable garden. Straw will improve the soil as it decays.

Leaf mould

Leaf mould has a tendency to form a crust, preventing water from penetrating into the soil. It is better to use leaf mould as a soil improver than as a mulch.

Leaves

A 2- to 3- inch layer of leaves provides good weed control. It is best to shred the leaves coarsely, using a shredder or your lawn mower. Whole leaves have a tendency to blow away, while finely shredded leaves do not allow water to penetrate. Oak and beech leaves help to acidify the soil for acid-loving plants. Leaves are usually easy to get, attractive as a mulch, and they will improve the soil once they decompose. After the leaves decompose, dig them into the soil and add a new layer of mulch on top.

Pine Bark

A 2- to 3- inch layer of pine bark is good for weed control. Pine bark makes an attractive mulch, usually dark coloured mulch. It can be purchased in various particle sizes, from shredded to large-sized particles, called nuggets. Large pine bark nuggets float in water and may not stay in place during a heavy rain. They may also attract termites and other insects.

Pine Needles

A 2- inch layer of pine needles makes an excellent mulch for acid-loving trees and shrubs. This mulch is very attractive and allows water to penetrate easily.

Bracken leaves

Gather bracken leaves before the spores form (before end of June) and use these as a mulch around your plants.

Shredded Hardwood Mulch

This mulch is good at suppressing weeds. It does not wash away easily. It decomposes relatively slowly, and it is very attractive.

Wood Chips

This material contains bark and pieces of wood of various sizes and makes an attractive mulch. A 2- to 3- inch layer of wood chips provides good weed control. Small wood chips decompose very rapidly using nitrogen from the soil, which needs to be replaced by nitrogen fertilizer. Wood chips may attract termites and other insects.

Cardboard & Paper

This can be used as a base layer in mulching, with another organic material added on top. Corrugated cardboard attracts worms, which seem to enjoy the glue between the layers. If you are using paper to create a layer, this should be built up of a few sheets –

but not too much. If the paper is layered too thickly, it can become much less permeable, and a mulch needs to allow free movement of air and water.

Inorganic Mulch Materials:

Gravel, Pebbles and Crushed Stone

These materials are permanent and are best used for permanent plantings such as foundation plants. A 1- inch layer of small rocks will provide good weed control. Do not use them around acid-loving plants since the rocks may add alkaline elements and minerals to the soil. These materials reflect solar radiation and can create a very hot landscape environment during the summer months.

Black Plastic

Black polyethylene film is very effective in preventing weed growth. It also holds water in the soil. Therefore, plastic is not recommended for poorly-drained areas as it may cause the soil to remain too wet, which could result in root disease problems. You may have to cut holes in the plastic if water does not go through it. There is a permeable black plastic available that has small holes in it to help with drainage. If exposed to sunlight, black plastic is broken down fast, losing its effectiveness as a mulch. However, if cover the black plastic with a layer of wood chips or pine needles this will reduce heat absorption and mask its artificial appearance.

Woven Ground Cloth / Matting

Woven plastic fabric ground cloth / matting are available in various lengths and widths. Unlike plastic films, woven materials allow water and air to move through them. They are very effective in controlling most weeds, although some grasses may grow up through the holes in the fabric. Landscape cloth / matting needs to be fastened down so it will not be pushed up by perennial weeds. Keep an eye out for slugs which can hid under the matting! Better moisture, temperature and weed control will be obtained by adding several inches of another mulching material on top of the landscape cloth.

Where to Use Mulch

Mulching is a very important practice for establishing new plantings, because it helps to conserve moisture in the root ball of the new plant until the roots have grown out into the surrounding soil. The growth rate and health of trees and shrubs



Marigolds grown through woven matting at Poyntzfield

increases when there is no competition for water and nutrients from weeds. Mulch also helps to prevent tree trunk injury by mowers and trimmers. Mulch entire beds of shrubs, trees, annuals, herbaceous perennials and ground covers.

Mulch can also be used to cover trails, driveways, and play and natural areas. Light-weight mulch such as dried grass clippings, pine needles and straw can be used temporarily to cover low-growing tender plants to protect them from frost injury.

When and How Often to Mulch

The best time to mulch new plantings is right after you plant them. Around established plants mulch is best applied in early spring. This is when plants are beginning to grow and before weed seeds start to germinate.

How often mulch needs to be replenished depends on the mulching material. Grass clippings and leaves decompose very fast and need to be replenished frequently. Inorganic mulches such as gravel and pebbles rarely need replenishing. As the plants grow and fill in the bed areas, less and less mulch is needed.

How to Apply Mulch

Before applying any type of mulch to an area, it is best to weed and water the area. Spread a layer of mulching materials over the entire plant bed. Keep mulch 2 to 3 inches away from the stems of woody plants. This will prevent decay caused by wet mulch and rodent damage during the winter. Keep mulch 6 to 12 inches away from the walls of buildings.

Newly planted trees require a circle of mulch 3 to 4 feet in diameter. Maintain this for at least three years. Do not pile mulch against the trunk. For established trees in lawns create a circle of mulch about 2 feet in diameter for each inch of trunk diameter. Increase the size of the mulched area as the tree grows. Try to apply the mulch at least 6 to 12 inches beyond the drip-line of the tree. Because the root system can extend two to three times the crown spread of the tree, mulch as large an area as possible.

How Deep to Mulch

The amount of mulch to apply depends on the texture and density of the mulch material. Many wood and bark mulches are composed of fine particles and should not be more than 2 to 3 inches deep. Excessive amounts of these fine-textured mulches can suffocate plant roots, resulting in yellowing of the leaves and poor growth. Coarse-textured mulches such as pine bark nuggets allow good air movement through them and can be as deep as 4 inches. Mulches composed of grass clippings or shredded leaves should never be deeper than 2 inches, because these materials tend to mat together, restricting the water and air supply to plant roots.

Mulch Problems

Mulch Toxicity

Though mulch benefits plants, "sour" mulch can quickly damage plant tissue and lower the soil pH causing injury or death. Bedding and low-growing woody plants are most easily damaged. Symptoms include yellowing of the leaf margins, scorching or dropping of leaves and occasionally entire plant death. Although it may be several days before symptoms appear, spreading sour mulch can damage plants immediately.

Sour or "acid" mulch is caused by poor handling or storing of mulch resulting in anaerobic (without air) conditions. Mulch piles need to "breathe" to prevent anaerobic conditions from occurring. In the absence of air, microbes in the mulch (mostly bacteria) produce toxic substances such as methanol, acetic acid, ammonia gas, and hydrogen sulphide gas. Sour mulch smells like vinegar, ammonia, sulphur or silage. Good mulch smells like freshly cut wood or has the earthy smell of a good garden soil. Another way to determine if mulch is sour is to test its pH. Toxic mulch will have a pH of 1.8 to 2.5.

To prevent mulch from turning sour or to cure sour mulch, you need to turn your pile once or twice a month, more frequently if the pile is very wet. Do not let the pile get larger than 4 feet thick in any dimension if you are not turning the pile regularly. A good aeration will eliminate the toxic compounds in 24 hours, but to be safe allow three days.

Slime molds

Slime molds are another type of nuisance fungus. They first appear as bright yellow or orange slimy masses that may be several inches to a foot or more in diameter. They are harmless but unsightly. Some fungi in mulches produce toad stools (mushrooms), and some of these are toxic to humans. It is a good idea to destroy them when small children have access to the mulched area.

Other references:

Henry Doubleday Research Association (Now called Garden Organic) – scientific paper reviewing mulches as weed control:

<http://www.gardenorganic.org.uk/organicweeds/downloads/a%20review%20of%20weed%20control%20mulches.pdf>