

Mulches for Your Garden

What is mulch? Mulch is organic material such as grass clippings, leaves, pine needles, wood chips, sawdust, aged horse manure, straw or compost that is spread over the soil surface. Using mulch is a simple way to recycle yard trimmings and improve your garden.

What does mulch do? Mulch helps to keep soil moist, suppresses weeds, protects sloping ground from erosion and stops soil compaction caused by driving rain and overhead watering. Mulch provides ideal conditions for earthworms and other soil organisms that promote healthy soil. When mulches break down they provide nutrients for the soil.

General rules for mulching. For perennial and annual flowers and vegetables, mulch should be applied when plants are at least an inch tall. Use a material that breaks down in a relatively short time, such as grass clippings, compost or leaves. The mulch will suppress weeds, break down to feed the plants, and decompose enough so it can be turned into the soil when the bed is tilled.

Shrubs and trees can be mulched with grass clippings, compost and leaves, or with a 3-4 inch layer of wood chips that will break down more slowly. Paths can be covered with a 4-6 inch layer of wood chips. To enhance weed suppression, put down layers of cardboard or a sheet of weed block fabric before spreading the mulch.

Mulch materials. Grass clippings can be spread in 1-inch layers. Grass clippings spread thicker than 1-inch decompose so quickly they become slimy and matted and limit air movement. Grass clippings mixed with shredded leaves can be spread in a 3-4 inch layer. If herbicide has been applied, compost the clippings first. Leaves of deciduous trees can be spread as a mulch in the fall. Leaves should be shredded if they are used on flower beds because unshredded leaves tend to mat. A rotary mower can be run across dry leaves to make a fine-textured mulch. Wood chips from dimensional lumber or tree prunings make a long-lasting mulch or path material. Pine needles are a good mulch for acid-loving plants like rhododendrons, azaleas, blueberries and hydrangeas.

Sawdust and finely-ground woody materials can be used on the soil surface, but don't mix them into the soil. They may tie up nitrogen, causing your plants to become yellow and stunted. Hardwood sawdust, generally available from woodworkers, is the best. Don't use sawdust from treated lumber. Avoid sawdust from plywood or composite board.

Applying mulch. Weed the area to be mulched and spread material around individual plants or over the entire garden bed. To avoid damage to plants, keep mulch 6-inches from the trunk of a shrub or tree and 3-inches from plant stems.

Where to find mulch materials. The best place to look for mulch materials is in your own yard. Every yard has grass, leaves or woody tree and shrub prunings that can be made into mulch.

If you need lots of mulch, order or download the Composter's Resource Guide, which lists local sources for many organic materials or check out the Organic Materials

Exchange, www.omexchange.org, which lists livestock manure, compost and various types of mulch such as wood chips, coffee grounds and more. Yard trimming and wood waste mulch is available at the County's Buena Vista Landfill and Ben Lomond Transfer Station wood waste facilities. Call Vision Recycling at 479-7857 for product descriptions and prices.



Learn more about composting
online at

www.compostsantacruzcounty.org



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