

A GUIDE TO MULCHES

Gardeners use mulches for several reasons. During the growing season they discourage weeds, conserve moisture, and help maintain soil temperatures. During the winter they offer protection for perennials, roses and other tender shrubs. Mulches also enhance the beauty of garden beds with texture and color that complement the plant material.

Mulches can be applied nearly any time of year, but the best time is mid-spring when the soil has warmed. If mulches are applied earlier, the soil temperature will stay low and plant growth will be delayed. Mulches should be applied 2 to 4 inches deep over relatively clean, **weed-free** soils. Covering existing weeds, especially weedy grasses, will not control them. Water deeply before you apply mulch. This is very important---never apply mulches to dry soil. Periodically check soil moisture and water if needed.

When selecting mulch, think about availability, affordability, appearance and ease of maintenance. The following list will help you select the right mulch or mulches for your gardens.

Compost	Use 1 to 3 inches in vegetable gardens, flower and shrub beds. Can be incorporated into vegetable and annual flowerbeds at the end of the season to improve the soil. Can be a source of weed, bacteria or other plant disease if compost pile hasn't had a sufficient heating period.
Bagged Steer Manure	1 to 2 inches of bagged steer manure can be used in much the same way as compost. It has been sterilized and should be free of problems. There are few nutrients in bagged steer manure and it should not be relied on as a fertilizer. Expensive if large amounts are needed.
Coarse Bark	Use 2 to 3 inches around trees and shrubs. Keep the bark back a few inches away from the base of the trunk to prevent rot or rodent damage. Decomposes slowly. May attract carpenter ants. Most effective around trees and shrubs.
Fine Bark (also called Mulching Bark)	2 to 3 inches of fine bark is easy to use in flower and shrub beds and will eventually break down and improve the soil. Must be regularly replaced.

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Sawdust	Use 2 to 3 inches of sawdust in vegetable and small fruit gardens, flowerbeds and in paths. Use well-rotted sawdust and be prepared to add fertilizer with a high nitrogen content if plants become pale or yellow in color. Sawdust is inexpensive and available at most soil yards. Blueberries and lingonberries appreciate a thick layer of well-rotted sawdust.
Shredded Leaves	Use 2 to 3 inches around flower, vegetable or shrub beds. Most leaves can be shredded with a lawn mower if a shredder isn't available. Black walnut leaves are toxic to many plants and should not be used in the garden or compost pile. Do not use leaves that have diseases or insect problems. Inexpensive, readily available.
Pine Needles	3 to 4 inches or more of pine needles can be used in shrub and flowerbeds. Shredded pine needles are easier to handle than the whole needles in flowerbeds and work well in paths. Whole pine needles are light and airy and can be used as winter mulches in rose and perennial beds. Needles take decades to decompose. Inexpensive, readily available.
Grass Clippings	Use 2 to 3 inches around vegetables, berries and flowers. To prevent smelly, wet mats, spread the clippings out to dry for a day or two before application. Don't use grass clippings from lawns that have been treated with a weed killer. Inexpensive, readily available.
Straw	Use up to 6-8 inches in vegetable gardens, around strawberries and other small fruits. Straw can be a fire hazard and/or a source of weed seeds in the garden. Chopping it up will make it more attractive. Inexpensive and readily available.
Pea Gravel	Use 1 to 2 inches around plants such as many of the rock garden perennials that are susceptible to crown and root rot. Can also be used to make garden paths.
Crushed Rock (White or Lava Rock)	Fairly expensive but does not need to be replaced very often. Won't blow away. Resists compaction. Often used over black plastic or weed fabric barriers. Most effective where a decorative look is preferred.
Layers of Newspaper	6 to 7 layers of newspaper can be used to mulch vegetable beds or paths. Once dry, newspaper is hard to moisten and may blow about. It is unsightly unless covered with another mulch such as bark.
Black Plastic	Controls weeds but interferes with oxygen and water supply to the roots. Must be covered with another mulch. Inexpensive, does not need to be replaced very often.
Fabric Weed Barriers	Weed barriers can be used in new vegetable gardens, small fruit gardens, new perennial gardens and shrub beds. Though much more expensive than black plastic, they allow more water, fertilizer and air to the plant roots. Does not need to be replaced. Must be covered with a layer of another mulch such as bark.