

Gardening with Organic Mulches



Mulch is material spread over the soil surface that influences soil characteristics and sometimes plant growth. Organic mulches are made from materials that once lived. Examples include bark, straw, yard waste compost, wood chips, composted manure, and leaves.

Organic mulches will decompose over time, providing food for earthworms and other soil microbes. How long the mulch will last before it needs to be replaced depends upon how large the individual pieces are. Fine sawdust will decompose sooner than larger arborist mulch.

There are many benefits from using mulch in ornamental and vegetable garden because they can:

- Reduce evaporation and/or
- Keep the soil moist
- Suppress weeds
- Minimize soil erosion
- Reduce soil compaction from rain
- Reduce spread of disease
- Warm up the soil
- Insulate the soil from extreme temperatures

How to Use Organic Mulches

- If you apply organic mulch to the garden in the fall to prepare it for planting in the spring, you may use green, non-composted material. However, if you apply it shortly before planting in the spring, it is best to use composted material. Otherwise, as the mulch decomposes, it may compete with your plants for nutrients.
- When using straw, autumn leaves, or other organic materials that contain little nitrogen, add extra nitrogen fertilizer to help them decompose. Weed-free straw is a light-weight mulch but can be a fire hazard.
- When using grass clippings which contain a moderate level of nutrients as mulch, apply a layer that is thin enough to dry readily. A layer that is too deep could turn slimy or form a dry crust which prevents water from penetrating.
- When using arborist mulch or wood chips, be sure keep 1-2 inches away from woody stems to prevent fungal infections or insect pests from invading the wet wood. Place the arborist mulch on the top of the soil, do not dig into the soil.
- Spread a 2" to 4" layer of organic mulch on the soil surface around your plants; do not cover the plants or the crown of the plants. At the end of the gardening season, organic mulches, except arborist mulch can be worked into the soil to improve its texture for the next planting season.

- In the fall, remove diseased leaves and weeds from the garden, and then add a layer of organic mulch. This will keep weeds low during the winter and spring while protecting plant roots from freezing temperatures.
- In the spring, push mulch away from the plant to help the in the root zone warm up faster.
- In the summer, before temperatures climb, push the mulch back to cover the root zone. This will minimize evaporation and moderate changes in soil temperature.
- Reapply organic mulch as it breaks down to get all the benefits of mulching.

Resources

Organic Mulch Plant Talk Colorado™, University of Colorado Extension

<https://planttalk.colostate.edu/topics/soils-amendments-composting/1609-organic-mulches/>

Mulching Woody Ornamentals with Organic Materials OSU Extension Service

<https://catalog.extension.oregonstate.edu/ec1629>

Using Arborist Wood Chips as Landscape Mulch Washington State University Extension

<https://pubs.extension.wsu.edu/using-arborist-wood-chips-as-a-landscape-mulch-home-garden-series>

This handout is adapted from “Gardening with Mulch,” presented by 10-Minute-University™ Clackamas County Master Gardener Association.

Characteristics of mulches

| | Water conservation | Weed control | Nutrient release | Erosion control | Longevity | Cost | Ease of application |
|---------------------------|--------------------|--------------|------------------|-----------------|-----------|------|---------------------|
| Bark dust (medium) | ** | *** | * | ** | ** | * | *** |
| Bark nuggets | ** | *** | * | ** | *** | ** | ** |
| Wood chips | ** | *** | * | ** | ** | ** | ** |
| Yard waste compost | ** | * | *** | ** | * | ** | *** |
| Arborist mulch | *** | *** | * | *** | ** | * | * |
| Tree leaves | ** | ** | ** | ** | * | * | * |
| Mint compost | *** | * | ** | *** | * | * | * |
| Sawdust | ** | ** | * | ** | ** | * | *** |
| Hazelnut shells | ** | *** | * | ** | *** | *** | *** |

* = low; ** = medium; *** = high

Source: *Mulching Woody Ornamentals with Organic Materials*, Oregon State University Extension

More information:

