

**July 31, 2015**

**AGRIVIEW**

**By: Rick Hirsch**  
**County Extension Agent**

**For nearly a quarter of a century, Texas Master Gardeners have established themselves as a premier corps of volunteers serving Texas citizens. An affinity of gardening and search for knowledge are the catalysts by which Texans from every walk of life enter the Master Gardener program.**

**Master Gardener “Interns” complete at least 50 hours of training, and have one year to complete a minimum of 50 hours of volunteer service to become a certified Master Gardener. They may be recertified every two years by fulfilling 12 hours of training and 23 hours of volunteer service.**

**Master Gardeners now respond to the vast majority of telephone calls to Extension offices in urban areas of Texas. They also have a Master Gardener web page and assist in answering tens of thousands of home gardening questions every year. Speakers’ bureaus are provided by many Master Gardener programs; these public presentations deliver research based information to garden clubs, civic clubs and other community organizations.**

**Master Gardeners provide leadership and support to educational programs targeted at critical issues, including youth development, environmental stewardship and**

**water conservation. The Henderson County Master Gardeners have developed into a very vibrant and dedicated organization. The group does a superb job of supporting horticultural education activities across the county.**

**Henderson County residents with green thumbs will have an opportunity to perfect their gardening abilities in our upcoming class of our Texas Master Gardener Program. The program is a joint effort between Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service, Henderson County Extension Office and Trinity Valley Community College and is designed to improve gardeners' knowledge, skills and capabilities, whether they are interested in horticultural professions or just want to keep a beautiful lawn and home garden.**

**Participants who complete the program will receive their Texas Master Gardener Certification. The program is offered at TVCC as a non-credit course through the Community Services Office.**

**All students must complete an application prior to registering for the class. Applications are available at the County Extension office located on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor of the Courthouse in Athens, or on-line at <http://henderson.agrilife.org/>, under Master Gardener publications. The applications should be returned to the Extension office by 4:30 p.m., Friday, August 14<sup>th</sup>.**

**ADVANTAGES OF MULCH:**

**Are you aware of the advantages of using a mulch in your garden? In one stroke you can reduce weed problems, improve soil structure, attract beneficial earthworms, keep**

the soil moist and cool, prevent erosion, and add nutrients to the soil. In short, good gardeners have much to do with mulch.

Texans should be thoroughly familiar with mulch; after all, nature has been depositing it for years on the floor of our Texas forests. Mulch is a ground covering, and the springy carpet of the forest floor is a natural example. The forest carpet decomposes, adding nutrients to the soil beneath. An organic garden mulch does the same thing for the garden, adding humus to the soil and improving its structure. Man simply takes his cue from nature, applying his own ground covering, natural or inorganic.

By depriving developing weed seedlings of light, mulch minimizes weed problems in the garden. The occasional weed that does appear is easier to pull. This easy weeding is the result of another benefit: moisture retention. Mulch slows moisture evaporation, protecting tender new roots from overheated soil while also lessening the watering chore.

A mulch can consist of inorganic or organic materials. Organic mulches include straw, pine needles and bark. Inorganic mulches include gravel, stones and even plastic. Availability is one factor to consider in selecting a mulch. Your choice of mulch depends on your personal preferences as to what looks the best and will be readily available. Of the materials listed, sawdust is probably the least desirable (even though it is available in most parts of Texas) because of its ability to rob nitrogen from the garden plantings. The key to using sawdust successfully as a mulch is to find well rotted and aged materials. If you are tired of seeing the weed in your garden doing better than the plants, or if you want to reduce your water chores and your water bill, give mulch a try in your garden.

**Below is a list of mulching materials, along with their advantages or disadvantages (if any).**

**\*Ground Bark - inexpensive, attractive, long lasting. Available in chip size or finely ground.**

**\*Peat Moss - expensive and somewhat difficult to prepare. Initially attractive, but it can dry out, lose aesthetic appeal and shed water.**

**\*Pine Needles - durable, resist wind disturbance, locally abundant. Potential fire hazard when dry.**

**\*Grass Clippings - available to most gardeners. Mat quickly, generating heat; disagreeable results if initial application is too thick. Spread thinly, allow to dry before applying to the garden. Do not use fresh clippings in your garden.**

**\*Straw - one of the best choices. Long lasting, can reduce moisture evaporation by as much as 70 percent. Will deplete soil nitrogen, which should be replaced by adding nitrogen fertilizer or blood meal.**

**\*Sawdust - easily obtainable in many areas. Easy to handle, but can severely deplete nitrogen if not well rotted and aged. Supplemental nitrogen fertilizing may be necessary.**

**\*Plastic Film - black polyethylene film is an excellent mulch, but unattractive where aesthetics are a consideration (it can be covered with decorative bark). Keeps soil temperatures even, eliminates weed entirely. Punch holes in it for water penetration.**

**\*Newspaper - readily available, builds humus. Can be used shredded or in sheets to**

desired thickness. Can be held in place by rocks, bricks, soil, etc. and covered for better appearance. The ink actually contains trace minerals beneficial to plant growth.

**IMPORTANT DATES:**

**August 14<sup>th</sup> - Applications due by 4:30 p.m. to Extension Office for 2015 Master Gardener Class**

**August 15<sup>th</sup> - Hunter Education Class - 7:30 a.m. - Texas Freshwater Fisheries Center, Athens - 903-676-2277 for more information and to register**

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*A&M AgriLife Extension Service. Visit our web page at <http://henderson.agrilife.org/>.*