



FROM A GARDENING PERSPECTIVE...

MULCHING - AN IMPORTANT GARDENING ACTIVITY

By

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There are many things gardeners do for their gardens each year. They plan, they plant, they weed, they fertilize and they water. There is one thing that gardeners do that is a **MUST** in any garden and is especially critical under current drought conditions. Application of at least 3 inches of mulch can shade fragile plant roots in summer and insulate them in winter. Best of all, under drought conditions, mulch can slow evaporation of infrequent rains or carefully applied water from rain collection systems.

Many different kinds of mulch are available. Depending on the desired result, a gardener might choose various forms of rocks. Rocks add a decorative touch to a landscape or rock garden and stay in place, especially if contained by a short barrier. The rocks should be small enough to cover the soil and protect the plant roots.

Another popular choice is mulch from tree bark or chipped tree limbs. Not only does this mulch offer shade to roots and slow evaporation, but it will decompose over time adding organic matter to enrich the soil. It actually “makes” soil!

Although this mulch can be purchased in commercial garden centers, in Palo Pinto County it can be acquired for free from county precinct yards. It might also be free (ask) from utilities that trim trees. It is important to remember that this form of mulch decomposes and needs to be reapplied at least once a year to maintain the recommended 3 inches.

Another form of mulch that can be used as natural mulch is newspaper. Not only will it decompose over time and contribute nutrition to the soil, but a layer of 8 thicknesses of newspaper will discourage weeds. The newspaper is best applied wet. It does not take much water to dampen a large pile of newsprint so it can be easily soaked. A layer of newspaper topped with 3 inches of natural mulch makes for happy plants and conserves water too!

Other materials to consider for mulch are pine needles or composted leaves. Pine needles are easy to handle and attractive, but decompose slowly and are not usually sold commercially. They acidify the soil which is a benefit for plants that like an acidic environment. Composted leaves also make good mulch provided they have been shredded using a mulching mower so that they do not form a mat. Thick leaf blankets tend to block natural flow of moisture and oxygen to the soil. Generally, pine needles and leaves are used as winter mulch to keep soil temperature universally warm and insulate plant roots.

Summer mulch is most often intended to help warm the soil to start Spring growth, provide organic material through decomposition and discourage weeds. In this category are the wood bark mulches such as oak, pine, redwood, and cedar. These wood mulches are graded from “chunk” for decorative use, “granules” for soil amendments and “shredded” for suppressing weeds. The chunk bark mulch offers a finished look while partially ground mulch gives a rustic look. Finely ground mulch virtually disappears as it is incorporated in the soil.

Gardeners usually develop a favorite mulch and have fun while acquiring a new dimension for their landscapes. If you have questions about mulch, call the Texas Agrilife Extension Office in Palo Pinto at 940-659-1228.