

MULCH

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There probably isn't a gardener who hasn't used some form of mulch in the garden. It not only helps improve the look of the landscape, but it has many other benefits, including some important environmental ones.

A good layer of mulch moderates soil temperatures and reduces weed germination. It conserves water, especially in the heat of summer, reducing evaporation by up to 50 percent and is a hedge against erosion.

How much and how often? The extension services in the Carolinas recommend keeping mulch to a depth of two to four inches. If it's too deep you risk soil that is too wet. That can reduce the amount of oxygen getting to the soil and actually encourage weed growth.

Mulch when trees and shrubs are planted. Otherwise, apply new mulch in spring and continue coverage through the summer when water evaporation is a greater threat.

Don't forget the trees. Mulch as much of the root zone as possible and extend the coverage about six inches beyond the edge of the canopy. Keep it at least three inches away from the trunk to prevent bark rot.

Types of Mulch. Luckily, a few good mulches are available in your own yard, and others are available at your local garden center. For vegetable gardens, organic materials are best because they decompose quickly and help improve your yield. For flowerbeds and shrubs, where you don't turn the soil often, you can use materials that break down slowly or not at all.

Source

- Information on recycling yard trimmings and home composting: www.clemson.edu/hort/HomeHort/hcompost/compost.php
- For more information on mulches: <http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/hort/hil/hil-608.html>

Compost vs. Mulch

Is there a difference between compost and mulch?
The answer is yes.

Compost: Decomposed organic matter that can be incorporated into the soil to improve its fertility, structure, drainage and water-holding capacity.

Mulch: Different types of organic matter that can be layered on top of the soil to moderate soil temperatures, reduce weed germination and retain soil moisture.

Many of the same materials used to mulch gardens are also used to make compost; the compost is just organic matter in a further state of decay than mulch. Each has its advantages for use in the garden.

— Source: National Garden Association, www.garden.org

Grass Clippings. The great thing about grass clippings is that they're absolutely free every time you mow your own lawn. They decompose quickly and are great for vegetable and herb gardens. Just be sure they're dry before you layer it on.

Leaves. Shred your leaves this fall and use as mulch. Contrary to popular belief, they do not increase the acidity of the soil, and they also do not need to be composted to serve as good mulch. You can even try mulching your entire lawn by not raking this fall. Let a couple of inches of leaves remain on the ground through the winter while the grass is dormant, and you'll rejuvenate your soil for the spring.


Straw and Pine Needles. When purchasing straw, make sure it's not hay, which has seeds that sprout into weeds. Both straw and pine needles decompose into your soil and won't change the pH.

Shredded Hardwood and Bark. Chipped wood makes attractive mulch. Shredded cedar is rot-resistant and remains attractive all season. Bark is typically sold as chips, nuggets or shredded pieces and also decomposes slowly.

Be careful of bulk-shredded wood, which might include pallets and other waste wood, and avoid the purchase of cypress wood chips. A

University of Florida study reports that today's cypress chips are not as effective as other wood for mulch because they come from young trees, and the harvesting of cypress forests is destroying the wetlands on the Gulf Coast.

Newspaper. Wet newspaper is a great way to help control weeds. Apply about four sheets deep and then cover with a thin layer of bark chips or other attractive mulch.

Plastic. While organic mulches that help build the soil as they decompose are always preferable, plastic works well in areas where you need total weed control. Just be careful, in our hot summers plastics can overheat the soil. 

Relative Value of Mulches

Material	Aesthetic Value	Source of Weeds	Resists Wind Blowing	Resists Compaction	Availability	Comments
Compost	Good	Fair	Excellent	Good	Good	Depends on ingredients
Lawn Clippings	Poor	Fair	Good	Poor	Excellent	Should be composted
Leaves	Good	Good	Poor	Unsatisfactory	Excellent	Should be composted
Pine Needles	Excellent	Excellent	Excellent	Excellent	Excellent	Excellent mulch; easy to handle
Wood Shavings	Fair	Good	Good	Good	Fair	good for incorporation; add nitrogen
Newspaper	Unsatisfactory	Excellent	Good	Good	Excellent	Not recommended when used alone
Plastic	Unsatisfactory	Excellent	Unsatisfactory	N/A	Excellent	Must anchor but not recommended

— Source: North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service, www.ces.ncsu.edu