

## **The Wonders of Mulch**

You've heard it again and again - mulch for weed control, mulch for water retention, mulch to keep roots warm in the winter and cool in the summer.

That's all fine and dandy, but how does one choose the correct mulch for all the different gardening situations that arise throughout the year?

My brief overview will go over why mulch is so important to plant and soil health, how to properly mulch in the summer as opposed to the winter, some problems to avoid, and how to deal with weeding and mulching. First, let's take a quick look at what you can accomplish when using mulch:

- Suppress weeds
- Keep soil warm in the winter and cool in the summer
- Conserve moisture - allows for deep and infrequent watering
- Support and encourage numerous beneficial organisms, such as earthworms, that make soil healthy
- Eliminate stress in shallow-rooted plants
- Provide nutrients to the soil and to plants
- Improve soil structure and drainage
- Can provide aesthetically pleasing and beneficial effects, such as when you use fine bark in a bed of landscape shrubs

### **The ideal mulch is:**

- Economical
- Readily available
- Easy to apply and remove
- Stays in place
- Supplies organic matter to the soil
- Is free of noxious weeds, insects, and diseases

Overall, the healthiest plants are those that have access to a consistent supply of water and nutrients, and mulch helps with this. As it breaks down, and when watered or rained on, mulch provides nutrients to the roots, earthworms, and soil organisms. This is why many plants have their feeding roots right under the soil surface, so they can easily grab the food as it becomes available to them.

### **Weed Before You Mulch!**

I know that's a bummer, but you will always have to remove perennial weeds like docks, dandelions, plantains, and grasses **before** you mulch. One downside is that the war against weeds is never over, and while mulch helps a lot, nothing can prevent wind-borne seeds from germinating on top of a mulched area.

The really good news is that when you have a nice layer of mulch, it makes it much easier to get rid of small weed plants because a light stirring with a cultivator or hoe will kill them with little effort on your part. You just have to keep an eye out, and be diligent, and get the tiny weeds before they turn into giant weeds.

**Warning:** When applying **any kind** of mulch be careful to leave some space around the plant crown, or tree base. If you pile **any kind** of mulch up against the crown, you will **rot the plant out and it will die**.

So leave 1 to 2 of breathing room near the stem or base of the plant and you'll be just fine. Mulch can truly make magic happen in the garden, plus its inexpensive, and there are numerous sources of the stuff no matter where you live.

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