

Mulch

mulch (mùlch) *n.* A protective covering, usually of organic matter such as leaves, straw, or peat, placed around plants to prevent the evaporation of moisture, the freezing of roots, and the growth of weeds. (From dictionary.com)

Just the thought of it makes some people cringe and others smile. The smart ones smile because they know that it cuts down on work and saves time weeding, and time and money watering. The most deciding factor with available mulches is what is regionally available. We are fortunate here in New Jersey to be able to get a wide variety of mulches because of our central location. We can get pine bark mulches from down south, and Canadian cedar mulch from the north. We can even get licorice root mulch from South America that gets shipped into Camden, New Jersey.

Why do we mulch? We mulch to keep watering requirements low, protect the roots of plants in the winter, keep weeds down, enrich the soil, and we mulch for aesthetic reasons.

The first of these reasons is quite simple. The mulch provides a protective barrier against evaporation to keep more moisture in the soil if laid at the proper depth. Approximately three to four inches is optimum for moisture retention.

The second reason for mulching is to protect your plants in the winter. Avid rose gardeners routinely mulch six inches or more around the base of their roses in the winter to protect the graft union from frigid winter temperatures. The key to doing this is to remove the mulch in the spring to keep it from smothering the plant when it is ready to start growing.

The third reason and the one that most people think of first is to keep the weeds down. Rutgers University has done numerous tests on optimal depth of mulch for weed suppression. They have determined the best depth of mulch is three to four inches in order to keep the weeds down. Anything less than that and it doesn't stop the weeds, and any more than that it starts to smother your plants.

The fourth reason and, in my opinion, the most overlooked reason for mulching is to help enrich the soil. Organic mulches break down over time to become a wonderful compost-like substance which enhances the organic matter content of the soil, slowly releasing nutrients into the soil. One of the first questions I usually get asked about mulch is "How long does it last"? My reply is that the shorter lasting the mulch is, the better off your plants are.

What other product can you use in your garden that serves five separate distinctive purposes? You can use a cross linked polyacrylamide granule (The stuff in baby diapers that holds moisture) then put a weed fabric down to prevent weeds, put a fertilizer down for your plants and then still find a way to protect your plants in the winter, find some sort of attractive looking soil cover, or you can simply mulch the area.

There are three basic types of mulch: There is organic mulch, such as hardwood pine bark or cedar bark. There is stone mulch, such as marble chips, red stone, or river pebbles. Last but not least there are the "recycled" mulches such as recycled tires.

Organic mulches include: Hardwood cedar bark, pine bark, licorice root bark and cocoa shell mulch. The hardwood and cedar bark are the most readily available, and the cedar bark mulches are available in dyed colors such as red, brown and black. Licorice root has a dark color and breaks down well to really enrich the soil. Cocoa shell mulch has a fine texture and wonderful chocolate smell.

Stone mulches include red stone, marble chips, pond pebbles or river stone, all available in various sizes. These mulches have the advantage of not breaking down and not needing to be replaced, but they do nothing to minimize moisture requirements, and actually increase it because the stone absorbs more heat and holds it longer. It also does very little for weed suppression.

Recycled mulches fall in the same basic category as stone mulches causing many of the same problems such as excess soil temperature and not holding moisture well. They don't break down and enrich the soil, and the verdict is still out on the fate of these mulches in the environment over the long run.

All mulches come in one of two forms. You can either purchase bagged or bulk mulch. Bagged mulch usually comes in 3 cubic foot bags. Remember that a cubic yard of mulch contains 27 cubic feet, and you can easily figure out that it takes nine bags of mulch to make a cubic yard. A cubic yard of mulch will cover 108 square feet to a depth of three inches (approximately 10' x 10'). Bulk mulch is sold by the cubic yard, and to help you visualize that amount, a standard size pick up truck will hold two cubic yards.