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University of Idaho Extension
Extension Educator
Mike Bauer 263-8511

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

MULCH HAS MANY BENEFITS IN THE GARDEN

The heat of summer is finally here, for the most part, and it is time to apply mulch in the garden. Mulch is simply a layer of material, organic or synthetic, that acts as a protective barrier over the soil. There are a number of reasons to use mulch: to help control weeds, to hold in moisture and conserve water, to regulate soil temperature, and to reduce disease.

Applying mulch hinders evaporation of moisture from the soil. It can also prevent soil erosion and compaction. It blocks the light to suppress weed growth, and can keep the soil cool in the heat of the day or hold warmth in on a cool night. Organic materials used as mulch encourage earthworms, whose burrowing aerate and help soil drainage, and also make an inviting home for helpful microbes that can stimulate plant growth.

There are different types of mulch that you can use to good effect. Using a mulch of organic materials such as grass clippings (dried and herbicide-free), shredded leaves or compost does the job, and can also benefit soil by adding nutrients as it decomposes. Apply this type of mulch in a 2- to 4-inch layer. Plastic or fabric mulches can also be used. These are laid directly on the soil, and then holes are made in the material to place transplants and seeds into the ground. Synthetic mulches warm the soil and suppress weeds, but without the added benefits of feeding and conditioning the soil that organic mulches supply.

Timing is important to application of mulch in our climate here in Northern Idaho. We have to be careful to pull away protective mulch from beds in the spring in order to allow the soil to warm. Depending on your microclimate, replacing mulch can begin as early as the end of June, but definitely should be in place by July in most areas. Watch your weather, choose your material, and let mulch help your garden thrive.

Kit Cooley has been a University of Idaho Master Gardener in Bonner County since 2008.

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