

Mulching Guide

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 EXTENSION PROGRAM

Gardeners use mulches for several reasons. During the growing season mulch discourages weeds, conserves moisture, and helps maintain soil temperatures. During the winter mulch provides protection for perennials, roses and other tender shrubs. Mulches enhance the beauty of garden beds with texture and color to complement the plant material.

Mulch can be applied any time of year; but, the best time is mid-spring when the soil has warmed. If applied earlier, the soil temperature will stay low and plant growth will be delayed. Mulch should be applied 2 to 4 inches deep over relatively clean, weed-free soils. Covering existing weeds, especially weedy grasses, will not control them. Water deeply before applying mulch; never apply mulches to dry soil.

When selecting mulch, think about availability, affordability, appearance and ease of maintenance. The following list will help you select the right mulch or mulches for your gardens.

Compost	Use 1 to 3 inches in vegetable gardens, flower and shrub beds. Can be incorporated into vegetable and annual flowerbeds at the end of the season to improve the soil. Can be a source of weed, bacteria or other plant disease if compost pile hasn't had a sufficient heating period. Animal manure must be one year out of the animal to be considered safe compost. Herbicides can be active in manure (unbagged) for over 3 years and cause damage to your gardens. Know your supplier. Use ¼ inch applied to a lawn in place of a regular fertilizer application for an organic, extended-release release option that feeds beneficial organisms.
Bagged Steer Manure	1 to 2 inches of bagged steer manure can be used in much the same way as compost. It has been sterilized and should be free of problems. There are few nutrients in bagged steer manure and it should not be relied on as a fertilizer. Expensive if large amounts are needed.
Coarse Bark	Use 2 to 3 inches around trees and shrubs. Keep the bark back a few inches from the base of the trunk to prevent rot or rodent damage. Decomposes slowly. May attract carpenter ants. Most effective around trees and shrubs.
Fine Bark (also called Mulching Bark)	2 to 3 inches of fine bark is easy to use in flower and shrub beds and will eventually break down and improve the soil. Must be regularly replaced.
Sawdust	Use 2 to 3 inches of sawdust in vegetable and small fruit gardens, flowerbeds and in paths. Use well-rotted sawdust and be prepared to add fertilizer with a high nitrogen content if plants become pale or yellow in color. Sawdust is inexpensive and available at most soil yards. Blueberries and lingonberries appreciate a thick layer of well-rotted sawdust.

Shredded Leaves	Use 2 to 3 inches around flower, vegetable or shrub beds. Most leaves can be shredded with a lawn mower if a shredder isn't available. Black walnut leaves are toxic to many plants and should not be used in the garden or compost pile. Do not use leaves that have diseases or insect problems. Inexpensive, readily available.
Pine Needles	3 to 4 inches or more of pine needles can be used in shrub and flowerbeds. Shredded pine needles are easier to handle than the whole needles in flowerbeds and work well in paths. Whole pine needles are light and airy and can be used as winter mulches in rose and perennial beds. Needles take decades to decompose. Inexpensive, readily available.
Grass Clippings	Use 2 to 3 inches around vegetables, berries and flowers. To prevent smelly, wet mats, spread the clippings out to dry for a day or two before application. Don't use grass clippings from lawns that have been treated with a weed killer – this includes “Weed and Feed” type products. Inexpensive, readily available.
Straw	Use up to 6-8 inches in vegetable gardens, around strawberries and other small fruits. Straw can be a fire hazard and/or a source of weed seeds in the garden. Chopping it up will make it more attractive. Inexpensive and readily available.
Pea Gravel	Use 1 to 2 inches around plants such as many of the rock garden perennials that are susceptible to crown and root rot. Can also be used to make garden paths.
Crushed Rock (White or Lava Rock)	Fairly expensive but does not need to be replaced very often. Won't blow away. Resists compaction. Often used over black plastic or weed fabric barriers. Most effective where a decorative look is preferred.
Layers of Newspaper or cardboard	6 to 7 layers of newspaper can be used to mulch vegetable beds or paths. Once dry, newspaper is hard to moisten and may blow about. It is unsightly unless covered with another mulch.
Black Plastic	Provides good weed control, helps keep moisture in the soil, and allows the soil to warm more quickly in the spring. Poke holes in the plastic so you can water through them. The top of a bed under plastic should slightly concave to direct water to the plants. A convex raised bed will shed water wastefully onto the paths. Must be covered with another mulch. Inexpensive, does not need to be replaced very often. WILL SOLARIZE THE SOIL IN SUNNY WEATHER AND KILL BENEFICIAL ORGANISMS.
Fabric Weed Barriers	Weed barriers can be used in new vegetable gardens, small fruit gardens, new perennial gardens and shrub beds. Though much more expensive than black plastic, they allow more water, fertilizer and air to the plant roots. Does not need to be replaced. Must be covered with another mulch.

How to estimate the amount of mulch needed:

$\frac{\text{LENGTH (Ft)} \times \text{WIDTH (Ft)} \times \text{DEPTH (in)}}{324} = \text{CUBIC YARDS}$

$\frac{15 \text{ FT} \times 15 \text{ FT} \times 4 \text{ IN}}{324}$	$\frac{900}{24}$	$= 2.7$	CU YDS
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