

Weed Control

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In search of effective weed control

Which is better for weed control in a permanent landscape of trees and shrubs—landscape fabric or arborist wood chips? Let's see how they stack up.

Landscape fabric seems like the perfect way to keep your yard weed-free forever. Cover your ornamental planting area with a material that allows water in but does not allow weeds out. You've no doubt seen freshly landscaped areas covered with landscape fabric. Holes are cut out where shrubs and trees are to be planted. Then the whole area is covered with gravel, bark or wood chips: An instant, low-maintenance landscape.

Unfortunately, there are a number of things that can go wrong. Geotextiles break down, especially if they are exposed to sunlight. Any areas of landscape fabric not covered by mulch will look tattered and frayed after the first summer. Eventually, all the fabric will need to be replaced.

Weeds will happily colonize any organic matter or soil that accumulates on top of the fabric, so a top dressing of gravel free of any organic debris would be the best way to go to keep weeds at bay.

No matter how vigilant you are, there will be some weeds that insist on putting their roots down through the fabric, making them almost impossible to remove. As the landscape matures, plant roots will also grow through the fabric and can be damaged if you need to remove the fabric for any reason.

Finally, water is slowed down when it moves through the interface of two surfaces of different porosity. Landscape fabric allows water through, but the water will not penetrate to plant roots as efficiently as it would in the absence of the fabric.

So, how about arborist wood chips?

You may be concerned about disease, but the fungal communities in wood chips are generally agents of decomposition and will not infect your plants. If you are still concerned, you can always let the wood chips age before you apply them.

You may have heard of nitrogen immobilization. When you add a woody material to your landscape, microbes in the soil have to work hard to decompose it and end up taking nitrogen from the soil until the decomposition process is well underway. It turns out that when it comes to weed control, this is a good thing.

If you add wood chips for the mulch in your permanent landscape, at the soil/mulch interface, there will be a lack of nitrogen, making it difficult for weeds to get growing. This lack of nitrogen will not affect your permanent planting, however, because the roots of your trees and shrubs are beneath the surface of the soil, where decomposition is well under way, and nitrogen from the decomposition process will be ready available for plant growth.



Mulch in your permanent landscape makes it difficult for weeds to grow — but can provide a soft resting place on a sunny afternoon.

Photo by **Rikki Van Camp** / The Daily Messenger via AP



Little bittercress is commonly found west of the Cascades. When its mature seed pods are touched, they split apart explosively, sending seed in all directions. A liberal layer of mulch can discourage it from growing. **Photo courtesy WSU Hortense**

Over time, your wood chips will decompose, adding organic matter and nutrients to your soil at a rate that your trees and shrubs will enjoy. This means you will have to replenish the chips from time to time, but at least you know that the decomposed chips have benefited your landscape.

If you keep your wood chip mulch from 3 to 4 inches thick, it will help suppress weeds and any weeds that do get a toehold can easily be pulled from the coarse mulch surface. It also will help retain moisture in your soil by keeping the surface cool and reducing evaporation, which means a well-mulched landscape of trees and shrubs will need very little extra watering once the plants are established.

Whether you are using wood chips on top of landscape fabric or on their own, remember not to pile them up around the trunks of trees or shrubs. Fungi are well adapted to dark, moist, low-oxygen environments, but above-ground plant tissues are not; they need good air circulation to stay healthy.

Before you make a trip to the store for a roll of landscape fabric to tidy up around your trees and shrubs, consider whether a load of arborist wood chips might not do a better job of discouraging weeds and encouraging healthy plant growth.