

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener
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Contact: WSU/Skagit County Extension: 428-4270

Along with all the pleasure of summer gardening in the Pacific Northwest comes a relatively long dry period that stresses many garden plants. Gardeners must either water extensively or see many plants wither from the dry conditions.

As soil dries, weeds that tolerate dry conditions begin to thrive in flowerbeds while bedding plants, shrubs and perennials struggle to compete for available water. Watering is expensive, often wasteful and time consuming. Although additional watering needs to be done during dry periods, the use of mulch in the garden can reduce watering and weeding considerably.

Mulch is anything that can be placed over the soil. Newspapers, gravel, many organic substances are all possible mulches.. The type of mulch used is generally dictated by where it is to be used in the garden. Vegetable gardens don't need to look especially decorative and several layers of newspaper laid between the rows work well. Bark chips are often used in large areas where shrubs and trees grow. No matter what it is made of, mulch in your garden will produce similar benefits:

- Inhibits weed seeds from germinating
- Slows evaporation
- Cools the soil
- Provides winter insulation and prevents repeated freezing and thawing
- Prevents soil from washing away

In addition, organic mulch, such as compost and well rotted manure, provides a slow releasing, natural fertilizer that feeds plants throughout the seasons and encourages earthworms to populate and regenerate the soil. However, organic mulch is not permanent, like gravel, and must be put down again every year. It is well worth the time spent. Organic mulch is marvelous stuff.

Organic mulches, although they break down and need to be renewed every year, also look nice. Flowerbeds and shrub beds look cared for and complete with a consistent layer of mulch. Plants have a backdrop to enhance their natural attractiveness.

The thickness of your mulch application depends on what you are using. Organic mulches should be spread to a thickness of 4 inches to enhance weed suppression and water retention. Hay or straw applied to a vegetable garden is lightweight and should be applied to a depth of six inches to be effective. Grass clippings tend to mold when still fresh so should be applied to a maximum depth of two inches. Mulches, such as gravel, should be installed over a weed barrier to a depth of two inches. Wood chips should be applied at depths of three to four inches.

Late spring and summer are excellent times to mulch. Mulches can be purchased from local nurseries and hardware stores in bags, from the local organic recycling plant and from gravel and rock distributors. It is handy to have a pick-up truck or an open trailer for picking up mulch but many places deliver to your driveway and landscaping businesses will even spread it for you to your specifications.

Few items are as valuable in money, time and resource saving as a layer of mulch in your garden. The additional attractiveness and soil regeneration from organic mulches make adding mulch to your garden a "must do" chore this year!

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Cooperative Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.