

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener
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Mulching is a very old gardening practice. Placing a layer of organic material around plants helps to give the garden a clean appearance, conserves material around plants helps to give the garden a clean appearance, conserves summer water, helps keep weeds under control and recycles plant nutrients.

A couple of important things to keep in mind are how much mulch to use and how to close to plants to apply it. Piling too much mulch around plants can jeopardize the plant's health. The layer of mulch around your trees, shrubs and perennials should be kept no deeper than 2-3 inches. Most plants need oxygen at the roots to grow well so applying deep layers of mulch can be counter productive. Rhododendrons, for example, can easily be smothered by too deep a mulch since they have fine fibrous root systems that are close to the ground surface.

Another tip is to keep plant trunks and crowns uncovered. Do not stack mulch up against the stems. When mulching materials get wet, they can hold moisture against the plant, which may lead to disease or decay. Rodents also may burrow into mulch in search of warmth in winter, and gnaw at the bark of your trees and shrubs.

There are several materials that you may use as mulch. Wood chips and bark are common choices for permanent tree and shrub plantings. Bark breaks down slowly and also looks good. The bigger the chunks of bark, the better the weed control is, since larger chunks do not have surfaces that are inviting for weed seed germination. There are more nooks and crannies in smaller dimension bark. Other mulch materials can be had without expense. Fallen leaves may be used, as long as they are not diseased. Large leaves, such as those of the big-leaf maple, don't work very well if used whole, because they pack down. Birch, aspen or Japanese maple leaves are smaller and can be applied without shredding. Be careful not to include leaves that are laden with fresh seeds or you may end up with trees you didn't mean to plant! Pine needles are also long-lasting and inhibit weed seed germination.

You may use grass clippings as a mulch, but they should first be laid out on a tarp to dry for 2-3 days. It may be easier to add the grass clippings to your compost pile, since homemade compost works well as a mulch and also looks natural.

Both compost and shredded leaves break down and work into the soil within one or two years, making either one a good choice for vegetable, annual and perennial beds. If you don't have a compost pile at home, commercial compost is readily available. These materials are uniform in texture, free of weed seed and work well as soil amendments.

Mulch can be considered the finishing touches to gardens and landscaping. Mulch not only helps control weeds, but makes plants look pampered and cared for.

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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 Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.