

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener
Date: December 5, 2004
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With gardening tasks winding down and our easy chairs calling us to football games and books by the fire, there's one more task we can do for our gardens this fall—give them a nice blanket of organic mulch.

Mulch insulates the soil from extreme or rapid changes in temperature and helps to prevent many weeds from becoming established over the winter months. It also prevents erosion, helps keep disease organisms from becoming active and keeps your garden beds looking neat.

Organic mulches are made of materials that were once alive. They decompose slowly and improve the soil by adding nutrients as they break down. Chopped leaves, compost, pine needles, grass clippings, wood by-products, evergreen boughs, nut hulls and straw all can be used as mulch.

Vegetable Beds: One effective practice is to spread a thick layer of organic mulch over your vegetable beds in the Fall. Mulch will minimize the impact of the freeze/thaw cycle and help your soil to maintain its crumbly texture. If you wait to apply mulch until after the first freeze, but before daytime temperatures stay below freezing, worms can go on working the soil for longer than without the mulch. The mulch slows the freezing process of the soil and gives the worms time to move deeper into the soil and not be killed by a sudden cold snap.

Vegetable gardeners have found that shredded leaves can be a very effective mulch, providing trace minerals to the soil as they decompose over winter. Leaves should be shredded. Whole leaves do not break down quickly and may keep the soil cold and wet long into the spring. You can add a topcoat of straw if you like.

Broad-leafed Evergreens: Broad-leafed evergreens like the rhododendron can suffer in winter. Their leaves continue to transpire, losing moisture, especially on warm, windy days. If the soil is frozen, the roots of the dried-out plant will not be able to replace the moisture that has been lost, and the plant becomes desiccated. To minimize damage, water these plants thoroughly before the ground freezes, then apply a thick mulch of pine needles or wood by-products. The mulch layer keeps the soil from freezing as deeply into the ground, letting the deepest roots continue to absorb moisture. It also protects shallow roots from the freeze and thaw cycles.

Flowerbeds: When mulching plants in your flowerbeds, cover the entire dormant plant only after the soil freezes, or after several freezing nights. If the plants are covered too soon, they may begin to grow and might be killed by the freezing weather. In the spring, when weather is warmer, pull the mulch off plants to let the new growth emerge.

Bulbs: Hardy bulb and corm plantings can be mulched lightly with 2 to 4 inches of composted leaves, shredded fir bark, or composted sawdust. Mulches should be kept light and open to allow shoots to emerge in the spring.

Mulching Roses: Where winter temperatures regularly drop to 10°F, roses need protection from the cold. The aim is to keep the roots and bud union alive and to preserve as many live canes as possible.

After the ground is frozen and nighttime temperatures remain consistently below freezing, mound soil over the base of each rose bush to a height of 1 ft. Use soil from elsewhere in the garden; do not expose the roses' surface roots. When the mound is frozen, cover it with a mulch of

straw, evergreen boughs, or other fairly lightweight mulch that will help to prevent alternate freezing and thawing of the mound. In the spring, remove the soil from the mound with care to avoid breaking new sprouts growing under the soil surface.

A 3-4 foot high wire mesh cylinder filled with non-compacting material such as straw, hay or pine needles, can also be used to protect much of the cane growth.

Mulch your garden now and you can be assured of a guilt-free winter by the fire, dreaming of spring and knowing you've done your best for your garden.

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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.
