

Mulch

Used with permission from an article by Mary Robson, retired WSU Extension Agent

If you haven't been using mulches, you could try this as a new garden management technique for 2005. Mulch (from an old German word "molsch" meaning "soft") means any type of organic material laid over the surface of the soil. Mulching the garden saves work, saves plants, and can save water in summer.

Saving work means having fewer weeds to deal with. An insulating layer of mulch can discourage weed seeds from sprouting.

Organic mulch also helps to moderate soil temperatures. Mulch also supplies humus as it gradually breaks down, providing a decomposed organic material that supplies necessary nutrients for the web of soil life, the microorganisms and macroorganisms (like worms) that proliferate in healthy soils.

Materials for organic mulch need to be somewhat loose in texture to allow water to penetrate and air to circulate. One writer says "the ideal mulch is easy to apply, does not need frequent renewing, is free from diseases and weed seeds...it does not pack, blow, wash, ferment..."(Avant Gardener, June 1991.)

Several types of mulch materials are common locally. Bark, in various sizes, works well around shrubs and trees. It breaks down very slowly and retards weed sprouting. Both of these are helpful characteristics. Some research has shown that the larger the bark chunk, the better the weed control. So it's an excellent choice if the primary need is landscape appearance and weed control. The slow breakdown of bark means that it doesn't provide much humus for soil improvement and plant nutrition.

In vegetable, annual and perennial flower gardens, and areas where appearance is vital, other mulch materials are more suitable than bark. Particularly if the gardener intends to be adding plants, dividing plants, and installing seedlings, a mulch other than bark is preferable. Rough "unfinished" compost, commercial bagged compost, and partly-broken down leaves make good mulches.

My favorite mulch for years has been fallen leaves, from a pile that breaks down into black crumbly "leafmold." It's fine to use for weed control and looks attractive, and is free! Leaves spread 2 to 3 inches deep on the soil surface do break down over time, usually lasting one season. Or mix fallen leaves with grass clippings and chipped tree trimmings to make an excellent mulch.

Don't get mulch on too thick, and don't get it too close to stems, trunks, and crowns of dormant plants. Leave a little space next to plants. One of the problems sometimes caused by mulch is the damage to plants where mulches have been applied too deeply and too close to trunks.

Mulching the garden reminds me a little bit of the pleasure of tucking blankets around sleeping children. It's certainly a caring gesture for the garden.