

Mulching Tender Plants

The benefits of mulching include discouraging weeds and garden pests, conserving moisture in the soil, keeping dust from blowing around, making it possible to walk in planted areas without getting mud on your shoes, and dressing up the beds. Mulch also improves topsoil as it breaks down and is a rich layer for protection of tender plants against weather extremes.

Before mulching it is important to weed, lightly cultivate and water – if Mother Nature has not done so. Plants which are tender in Sunset Zone 6, should be mulched just prior to the first hard frost. Several materials can be used, from bark chips which come in a variety of sizes, buckwheat hulls, cocoa bean shells (beware: can be toxic to dogs), pine needles, hay, straw, peat moss, manure, compost, peanut shells, cornstalks, sawdust, wood chips and leaves. (Do not use fruit tree or rose leaves as this may spread disease.) Household refuse like corn cobs, coffee grounds, grass clippings and newspapers can also be used for mulching. Avoid glossy magazines with colored inks, as they break down slowly and can leach ink into the ground.

Spread the mulch layer 2 to 6 inches thick depending on the size and density of material. Certain material like bark chips can be applied heavier since they do not compress readily as do grass clippings. Remember that you do not want to block air circulation, moisture or the sun's warmth. Sawdust and wood chips which are a smaller grade mulch should be applied 2 to 3 inches thick. Lighter mulches such as straw and pine needles require a spread of 3 to 6 inches deep.

In the spring, when all danger of frost is over, carefully pull back the mulch from over the tender plants. Mulch will draw nitrogen from the soil as it decomposes so be sure to add a little more fertilizer than normal (organic materials will decompose quicker under a layer of mulch) and replace mulch around the base of the plant being sure to keep the mulch from contacting the trunk or stems. Sit back and watch the plant take off for another season.

Sources

Successful Gardening. International Masters Publishers Inc.

Sunset Western Garden Book. Editors, Sunset Books, Inc., Menlo Park, CA., 1995.