



Mulching Your Gardens

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I have always been a great champion of compost. My grandmother and father were strong believers in the value of compost before it became fashionable to do so.

Last summer, one of the hottest, driest summers on record, we took a road trip. The second week of July was not the most advantageous time of year for me to go off on a six week trip, especially when I had extensive perennial beds, a vegetable garden. I had just planted two new trees and had two huge planters of annuals on the patio.

Knowing that we would be away for such a long period, I had visions of thistles as tall as the hollyhocks and sad drooping plants dying for lack of moisture. I decided to put down a two inch layer of bark chips over top of the two inch layer of compost I had spread over the garden in mid-June. This mulch layer was added over all of the perennial and shrub beds as well as around the two new trees.

One of my wonderful neighbours watered all of my indoor plants, and another watered the annuals, my new trees and the gardens but only if they looked desperate. Thanks to the compost and mulch I came home to very few weeds. My husband was pleased to see a flourishing, if somewhat limited garden of potatoes, onions, beets and squash. I lost none of my perennials and they all looked quite happy except for two Astilbe and a Cimicifuga –all of which always look unhappy by late summer because they are not situated well.

Many organic materials are great for mulch. Lawn clippings work well in vegetable gardens, as well as hay and straw although these may contain weed seeds. Leaves that have been chopped or shredded or composted make great mulch. Bark chips or composted bark mulch can be purchased. If you have enough compost, it makes a wonderful mulch as it improves the soil structure as well as providing nutrients for your plants. Newspapers, cocoa hulls, seaweed, ground corncobs, and pine needles can all be used as mulch. Pine needles might increase the acidity of the soil so they work best on acid loving plants like rhododendrons, azaleas and blueberries.

You can use bark mulch or wood chips over top of landscape fabric or plastic that has been laid on top of the soil. A disadvantage to this is that the plastic barrier prevents any improvement to the condition of the soil and makes it more difficult to plant additional plants. In the vegetable garden dark organic mulches as well as dark plastic help to retain

heat and moisture in the soil giving you an earlier start to your tomato and pepper planting.

If you are adding mulch to reduce watering and prevent weed growth, the best time to apply it is after the soil has warmed up in the spring and after you have weeded the area. Leave an inch or more of space around your plant stems to prevent excessive humidity around the plants, which encourages disease.

If you are using mulch to protect your plants over the winter, use loose materials such as straw, hay, or pine boughs that will insulate plants without compacting them under the weight of snow and ice. Do not apply the mulch until late fall early winter after the ground has frozen to prevent rodents from using the mulch as a warm over-wintering site. Mulching at this time will protect your plants from the freeze thaw cycles that heave shallow-rooted plants out of the ground exposing their roots and resulting in injury or death.

Studies have shown that mulching can reduce evaporation from the soil from 10%-50%. Mulch will improve poorly draining soil over time. It can be mounded around the base of the plant allowing water to run off and in drier areas of the garden or around newly planted trees, a well can be formed around the plant to hold the water near the root zone.

As long as your mulch is free of weed seeds, it can suppress the growth of weed seeds in your soil. Though some weeds may make it through the mulch barrier, they will be much easier to pull out.

A layer of mulch over your soil moderates the temperature keeping the soil cooler on hot days and warmer on cool days, and helps prevent the freeze thaw cycles that are so detrimental to our plants.

Organic mulches improve the condition of the soil by providing organic matter as they decompose. This organic matter is an ideal environment for earthworms and other beneficial soil organisms, which loosen the soil improving the water holding capacity of the soil. Be careful not to stir bark mulches into the top layer of soil because they can rob the soil of nitrogen.

Mulches reduce soil compaction and soil erosion especially on slopes after heavy rains, conserve moisture resulting in less watering, prevent weed growth, keep fruits and vegetables clean, improve the condition of the soil, protect plants from fluctuations in temperature, make it easier to move through the garden, and give the garden a “finished” look.

Mulching is simply one of the easiest and most beneficial practices you can use in your garden.

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