



THE BASICS OF MULCH

The best choice for mulch is one that both adds to the soil health and reduces pests such as weeds, and plant disease pathogens.

1. Mulch should conserve soil moisture and allow rain to soak in slowly
2. Mulch reduce weed seed germination
3. Mulch can influence soil temperatures—dark mulches, especially black plastic or other weed barrier fabric will hold heat and hasten plant maturity (Take care it will also increase heat in later summer) . Most organic, loose mulch keeps soil cooler and moister
4. Mulch can reduce the spread of plant pathogens (disease) that would otherwise splash from the soil to the plant
5. Keep any type of mulch at least a few inches away from the plant stem.
6. Apply mulch AFTER you've weeded
7. Accept that a few weeds are going to appear. Hand weed or cut them at the crown if they manage to grow late in the season when weeding around unwieldy vegetable plants is difficult
8. Mulch is either organic (natural substances) or synthetic

ORGANIC MULCH OPTIONS

Grass clippings – readily available, inexpensive, work fairly well to reduce weeding. A good source of organic matter and nitrogen as it breaks down. However, they can become moldy when wet, may contain seeds of grasses and weeds, and be sure they have not been cut from lawns that have been treated with pesticides

Leaves – readily available, inexpensive, work fairly well. A good source of organic matter and soil nutrients. However, they tend to mat together and become slippery to walk on; reduce this problem by running the through a shredder first

Paper – readily available, varying costs (free to pricey), works very well. Adds a bit of organic matter to the soil when it breaks down. However, newspapers make a great barrier but must be held down with rocks, clumps of soil or a second type of mulch like grass clippings. Rolled paper is preferred but must be purchased

Wood chips or bark nuggets – good for pathways *but not for vegetable gardens* where you will be digging year after year. This type of mulch is preferable for ornamental beds. Bark chips last longer and can go on thicker as it is chunky and less apt to block water and oxygen. Wood chips break down quicker and by so doing may rob some nitrogen from the soil. In some cases, applying over newspaper is the best defense against weeds

Compost – a great way to supplement soil nutrients and improve texture but can be too much of a good thing. Makes a nice mix with other natural mulches, especially wood mulch. Compost is generally a mix of some of the above materials plus vegetable and fruit scrapings; once decomposed this is an excellent supplement to both ornamental beds and vegetable gardens

Pine Needle mulch –inexpensive if you gather your own, or can be purchased by the bale or bag.

Although they are acidic, it would take a lot to significantly change the soil pH over a number of years. This is an option for ornamental beds but would be less friendly in a vegetable garden.

Straw – often an inexpensive option and should go on (vegetable gardens) approximately 4” thick. Make sure you are using straw and not hay. Straw is rarely without its own weed seeds but will make up for it by being a successful weed barrier. Straw breaks down well but if used in a wet climate may mold. (It can also become a habitat for slugs and mice

Gravel – has its uses in some ornamental beds but can be difficult to work with once weed seeds begin to find their way in. Expensive and amplifies temperatures—especially true in the heat of summer and will further heat-stress plants. A hardy choice for public areas near parking, but usually needs landscape fabric – not plastic- underneath.

OPTIONS FOR SYNTHETIC MULCH

Black Plastic – comes in rolls, relatively inexpensive. Apply over weeded, moist soil. It warms soil which may be a benefit for spring transplants and plantings but will increase heat stress in summer.

Generally not resilient and can tear. Must be held down to avoid breaking away in wind, and must be perforated to allow for water infiltration, unless you’ve placed soaker hoses below. As with other synthetics, it offers no benefit to the health of the soil (does not breakdown) and then will need to be gathered and disposed of in the fall.

Clear Plastic – similar concerns as black without the benefit of warming the soil. Weeds will germinate under clear plastic unless you have covered it with an organic mulch to block sun, so is of little value.

Landscape fabric – this is a better option than the plastics as it is porous and more durable. It can both warm the soil in spring to help plants, and, increase heat in the summer causing heat stress. Light weight landscape fabric is often used under mulch in ornamental beds but generally needs replaced every few years. Heavy weight, professional quality landscape fabric is preferable and costly but may be worth the initial expense. Both light and heavy weight landscape fabrics can be used in vegetable gardens and ornamental beds with varying success