

WHAT IS MULCH AND WHY DO I NEED IT?

“Mulch” is a generic term used to describe any material, organic or inorganic, placed on the ground around plants. Mulches can serve a number of purposes, but their primary use is to control weeds and conserve soil moisture.

Mulches fall into two main categories—inorganic and organic. Inorganic mulches include fruit-ripening films, landscape fabric, and rocks. Fruit-ripening films, such as “Better Reds,” are used under tomatoes, melons, and sometimes strawberries to speed ripening. Landscape fabric (weed barrier) is used primarily in shrub borders where there will be no interplanting of groundcovers or flowers. It prevents weed seed germination while allowing oxygen and water to reach the shrub roots. Lay the fabric on the ground, make cutouts for the plants, and then cover the fabric with a thin layer of decorative mulch (typically bark). Crushed rock, marble chips, or red lava rock are sometimes used as decorative mulches in xeriscaping.

The most commonly used organic mulches are wood-based. Typically, they are comprised of shredded bark (in this area, a mixture of hemlock and fir) run through a shredder to a graded size. The two most common grades are extra fine (the consistency of sawdust) and medium fine, which is generally comprised of pieces which can pass through a 2-3” screen.

Another common wood-based mulch consists of sawdust or wood shavings mixed with high-nitrogen organic matter and then composted. Fertil-Mulch® is an example. It has a darker color and more nutrients than shredded bark. Less commonly used wood-based mulches are play chips (cedar wood chips) or ground tree waste from arborists (usually mixed wood chips, bark, and needles). Remember that the more uncomposted the wood/bark in your mulch, the greater the chance that it will compete for available nitrogen in your soil as it breaks down. To compensate for this, broadcast over your mulch a balanced fertilizer such as Dr. Earth All Purpose Organic Fertilizer.

Finally, compost of any kind, leaves, grass clippings, and more exotic materials such as coffee chaff or nut shells may all be used as mulches. Compost is great for retaining moisture, adding plant nutrients, and improving your soil texture. However, if it dries out completely it can crust over and even become water repellent. Coffee chaff (available from some roasters) can also crust over when soaked and then dried. Nut shells (hazelnut shells are available locally) are said to be mildly deterrent to slugs. Before using grass clippings or leaves as mulch, make sure no herbicides have been used. Add grass clippings in thin layers, allowing each one to dry before adding more.