

Use of Natural Mulch in the Winter Garden

Properly protecting landscape and garden plants during the winter is essential to having healthy and thriving plants in the spring and summer. The first step in winter protection is to buy plants that are hardy for our area. This can be determined by looking at the information provided on the plant tag or by asking your local nursery or extension office. To determine your hardiness zone, you can refer to the USDA Cold Hardiness map which can easily be found online. Most areas of Oklahoma fall into Cold Hardiness Zones 6 or 7.

After choosing plants that are appropriate for Oklahoma's winter temperatures, the next step is to protect them over the winter by use of mulch. There are essentially two goals of winter mulching:

- 1) to insulate the roots of your plants from winter temperatures, and
- 2) to protect the plant from fluctuations in temperature

Newly planted plants may be lifted out of the ground by repeated freezing and thawing resulting in severe root damage. Warmer days, followed by severe cold snaps, can result in a plant beginning to wake from dormancy only to have new growth damaged by a sudden drop in temperature. Ideally, winter mulching should be started after the first killing frost and should be removed by March 1st.

Many materials may be used for mulch such as: sawdust, straw, bark, cotton burr, grass clippings, and leaves from the yard. If you are using grass or leaves, make sure they do not become packed and prevent air or water getting to the roots. You should shred tree leaves before you spread them on the garden. One simple way you can do this is to run fallen leaves over with a mower and then empty the bagging attachment over the plants you wish to protect. You can also crush the leaves underfoot. Plants should have at least three inches of mulch to properly protect the plants roots. At the end of winter, grass clippings or leaf debris can be raked out of the garden and added to the compost.