

Got Weeds?

Is the lawn taking over your tomato patch? Does your garden have areas that lose soil every time we get a big rain? Does your flowerbed dry out really fast? Need to warm the soil to get those seeds sprouting? Looking for an environmentally friendly (and easy) way to add organic matter and nutrients to your soil? If your answer to any or all of these questions is yes, then mulch is for you!

Many materials are available for mulching. What's the best kind to use? That depends on the season, your goals and how much you want to spend.

Plastic films are good for early season soil warming. Clear plastic warms the soil quickly like a greenhouse does but it will also stimulate the growth of weeds so it should be removed promptly after seedlings emerge. Black plastic warms the soil more than organic mulches and controls most weeds except nutsedge. Ensure adequate moisture with a soaker hose or drill tape under the plastic. If you use sprinklers, cut t-slits in the plastic to allow the water to penetrate. Landscape fabric is another good choice because it allows water and air to pass through.

Organic mulches are some of the most commonly used and are the best for increasing organic material back into soil. They work well to reduce soil temperature during hot weather so avoid applying these until the soil warms in the spring or risk delayed plant development. After the soil warms in the spring, apply a 2 to 4-inch layer around established plants. Be sure adequate moisture is available before you mulch.

Bark chips, peat moss, composted manure and cottonseed hulls are available at your local garden center. The Tulsa County Mulch Site offers unlimited FREE wood chips (2100 N. 145th E. Ave. - 7 days a week). Other organic options are compost, chopped cornstalks, leaves, newsprint, peanut shells, pine needles and straw. As they break down, organic mulches naturally add nutrients to the soil. At the end of the growing season, compost any remaining mulch for next year's garden.

Sawdust, wood shavings and ground corncobs are also an option, but tend to consume nitrogen when they break down. If you use a lot of them, increase the amount of nitrogen fertilizer you apply by one-fourth. Lawn clippings are a good choice *if* they are free of pesticide residue, weed seeds, diseased material and other pests.

Roses, shrubs, and young trees benefit from year round mulching. A 2-inch layer will conserve moisture, moderate soil temperature, and suppress weed and grass growth. Newly planted ornamental trees need a circular area of mulch that extends at least 3 feet from the trunk. This makes mowing easier and helps prevent mechanical damage to the young bark. Add mulch as needed to maintain the 2-inch depth. Keep mulch 2 to 4 inches from the trunk as too much mulch too close can create an environment favorable to disease and insects. Think donut, not volcano!

Mulching is a great, easy (and sometimes free!) way to solve many common gardening problems . . . not to mention it really dresses up a flowerbed!

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