

The Art of Mulching

Very few gardening practices are as beneficial as mulching. Simply said, proper mulching can deliver more than just a tidy aesthetic to garden beds; it can help maintain an optimal growing environment under normal seasonal conditions, but also preserve your landscape plants when weather extremes arrive.

What is mulch? Mulch is a broad term for any material used to cover the exposed ground around plants. It does not have to always take the form of wood or bark chips...there are [many materials available](#) for mulching, and suitability depends on many factors: what requires mulching, what may be available or cost-effective, and the season or purpose for your mulch.



When should a garden be mulched? For growing season benefit, mulch is applied in the spring when seedlings or perennials emerge, or after transplanting. Organic mulches can be worked into the soil in the fall before winter layer reapplication in December. Replace or return material back in position if washed away; consider another mulch type if this is a continuous problem.

What makes a good mulch?

A good mulch should be:

- Lasting and decomposable within one season
- Readily available, cost effective and easy to apply (this encourages regular application)
- Relatively free of diseased material, weed seeds or undesirable pests
- Water-permeable and fixed in place without compressing
- Removable (inorganic mulches) or incorporated into the soil (organic)

While Oklahoma soils are generally high in mineral content, they could always benefit from regular [organic matter improvement](#). Incorporating organic mulch materials such as garden refuse, leaves and lawn clippings into the soil keeps them out of the landfills and returns them to the soil where they belong!

The Benefits of Mulching

Do I really have to mulch? The short answer is no, but the long answer is why would you **NOT** mulch with so many free options available - neighborhood autumn leaves, grass clippings, residential composting, and in some areas, municipal green waste sites offer disposal *and* collection opportunities.



Free is **good**, organic is even **better**...but these benefits are the **BEST** reason for mulching:

- Constant weed pulling and soil cultivation around plants disturbs and damages roots. Mulch can prevent germination of weeds and control weed growth. Damaging weed eating and mowing activity can therefore take place at a safe distance from tree trunks, shrubs, bushes and garden bed edging.



- Soil moisture is retained, evaporation lessens, meaning less watering time and expense. This can translate into a more uniform moisture level, greater water absorption and less risk for foliar disease caused by frequent overhead watering.

- Increase in decomposing organic matter improves soil condition, texture, structure and nutrient availability to plants. This is also an optimal environment for beneficial organisms.

- Regulation of soil temperature provides roots insulative protection from extreme heat and cold
- Prevents soil erosion
- Reduction of fruit-to-soil contact diseases
- Easier, cleaner movement through garden beds without compaction

Mulching Techniques

Here are some tips for choosing and applying mulch:

- [This OSU Fact Sheet](#) has an extensive chart on mulch types and uses!
- Mulch ranges in texture from coarse (e.g. hay, straw) to fine (e.g. sawdust, cotton seed hulls). The depth will be greater for coarse mulches than for fine. So, the depth for weed prevention might be 1 - 1 ½ inches of cotton seed hulls versus 6 - 8 inches of hay.
- Keep mulch from covering stems and tree trunks; mounding invites insects and rot.
- Replace mulch should it blow or wash away. Consider greater depth or finer texture options.
- Apply in spring, when missing or decomposed, and in winter when needed for cold protection. Turn decomposed material into soil before winter reapplication.

For details on the many different [kinds of mulches and applications](#), the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service provides sound, reliable information. Click on the embedded links within this article and visit the [resources at the end of this article](#) to learn more.

Resources: Mulching

[OSU Fact Sheet HLA-6005: Mulching Garden Soils](#)

[OSU Fact Sheet L-436: All You Need to Know About Mulch](#)

[OSU Fact Sheet HLA-6448: Backyard Composting in Oklahoma](#)

[OSU Fact Sheet HLA-6436: Healthy Garden Soils](#)