



Garden Mulches

A garden mulch is any material spread on the soil surface to modify the environment where the plant is growing. The materials used can be natural or synthetic and can be used in any number of combinations within a single garden or around a homestead. The proper selection and use of a mulch will result in increased growth and yields. Mulches used improperly can have the opposite effects.

Benefits of Mulching

- Reduces soil evaporative water losses
- Increases soil temperature
- Controls or suppresses weeds
- Reduces nutrient leaching during heavy rainfall
- Maintains soil tilth - keeps soil open and loose for water and air penetration
- May add nutrients to soil (organic mulches)
- Keeps fruit clean during heavy rainfall

Mulching Materials

Natural (organic)

Leguminous hay (clover and alfalfa) Adds nitrogen. Can contain lots of weed seeds. Apply 6-8 inches thick.

Grass hay (timothy, ryegrass, orchardgrass) and straw Extra nitrogen fertilizer needed for decomposition. Can be a fire hazard. Apply 6-8 inches thick.

Grass clippings Extra nitrogen needed. Apply after drying for 2-3 days. Clippings may mat, especially on slight slopes where water will easily run off the mat. Apply 2-3 inches thick.

Leaves Extra nitrogen needed. Dry leaves will blow and wet leaves will compact. Either chop the leaves before using or mix with other materials at application. Apply 3-4 inches thick.

Pine needles Extra nitrogen needed. A very easy material to apply and will not compact. Apply 3-4 inches thick.

Sawdust Extra nitrogen needed. Aged sawdust is best to prevent nitrogen deficiency. Apply 2-3 inches thick.

Compost Excellent source of nutrients. Could contain weed seeds and might have an objectionable odor if decomposition is not complete. Apply 2-3 inches thick.

Paper After plants have begun to grow, lay down several thicknesses of newspapers, and weight down with rocks, boards or thin layers of other organic materials. Watering the paper thoroughly at the time of application will help to hold it down.

Several companies manufacture recycled paper into mulch, sold in rolls and installed much like black plastic.

Other organic mulching materials include crushed corn cobs, peanut hulls, buckwheat hulls, bark and wood chips, wood shavings, seaweed and peat moss. All natural mulches should be applied after the crop has begun to grow and after the soil has warmed; do not allow mulch materials to contact plant stems, as this increases the risk of disease. The soil should also be weed-free and moist.

Pebbles, stone chips, gravel, etc., can be used in some areas, but are not convenient where cultivation is necessary.

Synthetic

Black plastic Excellent for conserving moisture and nutrients, warming the soil and providing weed control. It is difficult to apply under windy conditions. Since it will not decompose in the soil it must be removed after each crop. Removal is easiest right after the crop is finished. In selected locations, and when handled carefully, it can be used more than one year. The most convenient size to use is 1 ½ mil thick (.015 inch) and 3 or 4 feet wide. Crops responding best to black plastic are vine crops (cucumbers, melons and squash), tomatoes, peppers and eggplant. Before planting (seeds or transplants) lay the plastic tightly and evenly over moist, fertilized soil, securely burying the ends and edges. Cut slits or holes through the plastic to plant seeds or transplants.

Clear plastic Not recommended because light passes through, permitting weeds to grow. However, it can be used for early and rapid soil warming if the clear plastic is later covered with hay, straw, newspaper, grass clippings or other organic materials to block the light.

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