

## **SELECTING AND USING ORGANIC MULCHES FOR GARDENS AND LANDSCAPE PLANTINGS**

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The selection and proper use of organic mulches is critical to obtaining the desired results. Mulches are used to achieve annual weed control, moderate soil temperature, and conserve soil moisture. They can reduce the severity of some diseases; reduce fruit and vegetable spoilage; and yield fruits, vegetables, and flowers free of rain-spattered soil.

### **GRASS CLIPPINGS**

Lawn clippings must be allowed to dry prior to application. Do not use clippings from lawns treated with herbicides or those with a lot of weeds. These are a short term mulch and works best in the vegetable garden and in annual flower beds. Use a two inch layer.

### **STRAW**

Wheat, oat and soybean straw are the best types to use for the vegetable garden and strawberry beds. Be sure that it is free of crop and weed seed prior to use. Straw is not advised for trees and shrubs, as it offers habitat to rodents that could damage the plants. A 3 to 4" layer is recommended.

### **LEAVES**

Only use shredded or composted leaves for mulch. They do not mat down as readily as whole leaves, nor blow away as much in windy weather. Leaf mulch is suitable for vegetable gardens, raspberry plantings, perennial flower beds and trees and shrubs. While some leaves, such as oak, are acidic they can be safely used in the home garden without significantly changing the soil pH. They should not be used to mulch perennials or strawberries over the winter.

### **PINE NEEDLES**

Pine needle mulch is attractive and widely used in the southern states. They are light, airy and decompose so slowly that they may last several years. As an acidic mulch, pine needles are especially favored for acid loving plants such as azaleas and blueberries. They can also be safely used elsewhere in the home landscape, but are not recommended for vegetable gardens. A large, well established windbreak of pines provides an excellent source of pine needles.

### **COCOA-BEAN HULLS**

Cocoa-bean hulls are an excellent one-season mulch for annuals, perennials and roses. A by-product of chocolate production they are light, easy to use, and have the bonus of a wonderful aroma. The aroma only lasts for several days after application, however, this is still an excellent product, and a mulch of 1 to 2 inches provides sufficient cover. They do tend to be blown in the wind, so use heavier mulch over top to help hold it down. Use caution around dogs, as chocolate, including cocoa-bean hulls, is toxic for them.

## SHREDDED NEWSPAPERS

Shredded newspapers or whole sheets are often the most easily accessible mulches. Most newspapers use organic inks, so gardeners need not worry about lead contamination except possibly on colored newsprint. If you use whole sheets, take 6 to 8 sheets and wet them down. It will be necessary to cover them with some soil, or hay, to prevent them from blowing away.

## GROUND CORNCOBS

After they are ground, corncobs darken, providing attractive mulch around trees, shrubs, and raspberries. They are usually weed-free, easy to use, and lightweight. Their light weight makes it advisable to use straw or other mulch on top to help hold them in place.

## SAWDUST

Sawdust makes good long term mulch; it is easy to use and weed-free. Generally, it should be aged for at least a year prior to use. Fresh sawdust can cause problems with nitrogen depletion in crops where it is used. Do not use sawdust from treated lumber in the yard or garden.

## WOODCHIPS

This is an excellent mulching material and it may be available from local arborists. It is obtained from tree and shrub clippings passed through a mechanical chipper. Municipal or private yard waste sites are other possible sources of wood chips. They are best used around trees and shrubs and in perennial beds. In this area it may be advisable to keep the mulch away from the house and driveway due to the artillery fungus common in wood mulch as the fungus leaves unsightly stains on siding and cars.

## BARK MULCHES

These are commercially packaged in several forms--shredded, chips, nuggets, or chunks. They are available in bulk quantities from nurseries and landscape companies. Use bark mulches around trees, shrubs and perennial beds. Bark mulches are attractive and weed-free.

## TIMING FOR MULCHING

Annuals, bulbs, ornamental grasses, ferns--after planting

Biennials--after transplanting in the fall

Perennials--apply after several killing frosts to protect in the winter. Remove most after the new growth sprouts in the spring

Woody ornamentals (trees and shrubs)--apply at least two inch depth for newly planted material

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