

Mulch: It Does A Garden Good by Jean Payne

In North Texas, we need to do everything possible to conserve water and reduce heat stress on our plants. One of the best ways to do both is to use mulch around the plants. By definition, mulching is simply placing a layer of organic or inorganic material on top of the soil.

Benefits of mulching include:

- Conserves moisture by slowing evaporation
- Retains moisture in the root zone
- Controls weeds by preventing and inhibiting germination
- Maintains even soil temperature, cooler in the summer, warmer in the winter and a more even temperature from dawn to dusk
- Prevents soil crusting
- Helps stop soil erosion and helps prevent rainwater runoff
- Prevents heavy rain from splashing soil on the lower leaves of plants
- Helps prevent compaction on walkways throughout the garden and beds
- Minimizes cultivation
- Saves time and money by reducing water, pesticide and herbicide use and plant replacement
- Landscapes and beds with mulch look better and help create a sense of place when using mulch that is similar in appearance to your surroundings

The big advantage of organic mulches is that they improve soil texture and add nutrients. The earthworms drag the organic mulch down and enrich the soil with humus. The improved aeration and drainage reduces the need for tilling and spading. Organic mulch slowly adds nutrients to the soil as it breaks down.

Commonly available organic mulches include leaves, grass clippings, peat moss, wood chips, bark chips and straw. Organic mulches tend to be a better weed barrier than inorganic mulch. Seeds find it easier to slip to the soil level through river rock, stone, gravel, and the crushed products easier than through wood chips.

Inorganic mulches provide many benefits to the garden and landscape. Inorganic mulches are crushed gravel and granite, river rock or small stones, lava or granite rock, decorative and colored stones, sand, crushed brick, crushed graded recycled glass, landscape fabric sometimes referred to as geo-textiles, plastic and rubber mulch.

Crushed gravel and small stone mulch is sometimes preferred for xeriscape beds or strips or rock gardens. The crushed gravel or stones will not cause root rot in plants requiring dry conditions. Crushed granite and gravel emphasize the southwest type of landscape, helping to create the sense of place for our area.

Mulching with three to six inches of organic materials twice a year is recommended for most garden and landscape plants. The mulch should not touch the stem of the plant, so leave about one inch clear area around the plant stems.