

Why Mulch?

by Debbie Lauer, Bell County Master Gardener

Are you looking for something that can save you time, reduce manual labor and possibly save some money? How about something that can attract beneficial earthworms, keep your soil cooler, and help improve your soil? If I told you that your plants would be healthier would I get your attention? Now imagine something that can do all of the above in your garden and yard. What is this incredible thing? Mulch.

Mulch can be defined as any material placed on the surface of the soil. Mulches can be organic (shredded bark, pine needles, straw or even grass clippings) or inorganic (crushed rock, pea gravel or plastic). Organic mulches reap you the most benefits.

A layer of organic mulch placed around your flowers, shrubs and even around your trees can save you time and labor as the mulch prevents weed seeds from reaching the soil and germinating. The ones that do manage to germinate will be easier to pull. Research at Texas A&M University has shown that un-mulched soil may lose as much as twice the water due to evaporation as mulched soil. As organic mulch ages, microbes in the soil start to break it down, this increases nutrients available to your plants in the soil. The increased organic matter in your soil will attract earthworms. Once the earthworms arrive you are on your way to a healthier looser and more nutrient rich soil that will keep your plants happy. This transformation will not occur overnight, but it will happen.

You can even mulch your lawn and obtain benefits. Put a mulching blade on your mower. This type blade will chop clippings very finely so that they will fall through the grass and come in contact with the soil. Grass clippings are broken down quickly by microbes and add nitrogen back to your grass with every mowing. You will need less fertilizer to keep your grass green, you will not have to rake and bag clippings, and it will save space in landfills.

Still not convinced? Here are some more reasons to mulch. Mulches break up the torrential flood during heavy rain, they protect the soil below and prevent erosion. They also prevent mud and some disease organisms (fungal spores) from being splattered onto plants, homes and sidewalks. Mulched soils absorb water better.

OK. Now I have convinced you to add mulch to your gardening routine, how much? A layer of 2 to 6 inches should be applied. The depth depends on the material used to mulch. Apply more inches of coarser mulch. Four inches of loose fibrous mulch (with pieces up to two inches in size) works well around trees and shrubs. With finer sized mulch (about one inch in size) use less, a two inch layer will be sufficient. Be careful with very fine mulches (1/2 inch and smaller) the particles can settle and create a mat that will keep air and water from reaching the plants you are trying to benefit, use one inch.

When applying mulch around plants leave a small hole around the base of the plants and cover the entire bed area with mulch. Don't pile mulch up around the trunks of trees. Be sure to apply it as evenly as possible and don't forget to add mulch as those microbes start eating away at your layer of mulch. Once a year your mulch will need topping off. Rake back the large pieces, work the small ones into the soil along with some compost and re-apply mulch to the appropriate depth.

If you prefer to use inorganic mulches keep a couple of things in mind. You lose the benefits that come from adding organic material to your soil. Also remember black rock absorbs heat so you will lose the cooling benefit of mulch. White rock reflects heat and could create too much heat for the surrounding plants to thrive or even survive.

For more information on mulch see the article "Mulches for Enhanced, Low-Cost, Low-Maintenance Landscapes" by Malcolm Beck, Jerry M. Parsons and Roland E. Roberts from PLANTanswers, a service provided by Texas Agricultural Extension and Texas A&M.