

USING MULCH

WHAT IS MULCH?

Mulch is a protective covering of material that is spread over the soil surface to improve your garden. Organic mulches are made from recycled plant materials, such as compost, yard waste, or chipped woody materials like tree branches and Christmas trees. Organic mulches biodegrade and therefore must be replenished periodically. Inorganic mulches are inert materials such as plastic, fabric, or crushed stone.



WHAT DOES MULCH DO?

Mulch reduces evaporation from the soil surface, keeps down weeds, and stabilizes soil temperature. Mulch also protects sloping ground from soil erosion and stops soil compaction caused by driving rain on the soil surface. Organic mulches feed the soil and provide ideal conditions for earthworms and other soil organisms necessary for healthy soil—plus it's readily available, free, and easy to apply!

WHICH MULCH?

Annuals (both flowers and vegetables): Mulch with finer materials that break down quickly, such as pesticide-free grass clippings or leaves. On annual beds, till the mulch into the soil at the end of the growing season.

Perennials & woody plants (shrubs, trees, etc.): Mulch with a thick layer (2-3 inches) of compost or chipped wood.

Paths: Mulch with a thick layer of shredded or chipped wood. To keep paths weed-free even longer, put down cardboard or several layers of newspaper before spreading the mulch.

HOW TO APPLY MULCH

Mulch can be spread around individual plants as far as the distance of the outermost branching (this is called the drip line); or mulch can cover an entire garden bed.

Weed the area to be mulched. Apply up to 3 inches of mulch, (see chart on back). Use less on shallow-rooted plants such as rhododendrons and azaleas.

Be sure water is still able to penetrate the mulch; don't smother the roots of the plants. Make sure the mulch doesn't touch the stems of plants or the bark of trees as this could cause rot and invite pests and disease.

Winter mulches: Insulate the soil by applying compost, shredded leaves, wood chips, or evergreen boughs in late fall (after the first frost) to keep freeze and thaw cycles from damaging plants.

Summer or growing mulches: Apply lighter, organic mulches in spring (after the final frost) to improve the soil, reduce weed growth, and retain soil moisture.

Any time: Mulch can be applied any time in in perennial beds, around trees and shrubs, or on paths.

WHERE TO FIND MULCH

New York City residents can get free wood chips at at MulchFest in January, or through NYC Parks and Recreation borough offices. Another great place to look for mulch is right in your yard. Grass, leaves, or other green and woody materials can all be made into mulch. You can also use newspapers and cardboard. For chipped or shredded woody wastes, try contacting a tree service in the telephone directory. Some wood shops make their organic byproducts available. *Don't use sawdust or chips from pressure-treated or chemically-treated wood.*

The NYC Compost Project, created by the NYC Department of Sanitation in 1993, works to rebuild NYC's soils by providing New Yorkers with the knowledge, skills, and opportunities they need to produce and use compost locally. **Learn more at nyc.gov/compostproject.**

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HOW TO USE COMMON MULCHES

ORGANIC MULCHES (RECOMMENDED)

MULCH MATERIAL	DEPTH	WATER RETENTION	WEED CONTROL	DECOMPOSITION RATE	TIPS FOR USING MULCH
compost	3 in.	good	fair	rapid	can mix with leaves or other mulch
wood chips	2-4 in.	good	good	fairly slow	can rob nitrogen if mixed into soil
leaves	3 in.	fair	fair	slow; adds nitrogen	adds nutrients; use whole or shred with mower
grass clippings	1 in. max.	good if not matted	fair	rapid; green adds nitrogen	avoid grass treated with pesticides or herbicides; mix with leaves for thicker layers
green cover crops	full height	good	good	tilled under	rich in nitrogen
evergreen boughs	several layers	fair	fair	slow	good for erosion and insulation from wind; remove in spring
pine needles	1.5 in.	good	good	slow	good for acid-loving plants (rhododendrons, azaleas, blueberries)
mixed bark	2-3 in.	good	good	slow	replace every 2 years
straw	1-2 in. chopped	good	good	fairly slow, robs nitrogen	can rob nitrogen if mixed into soil; avoid oat straw
newspaper	4-6 sheets	good	best	rapid—lasts 1 season	wet the paper & cover with another mulch to hold in place (ink is not toxic)

INORGANIC MULCHES

MULCH MATERIAL	DEPTH	WATER RETENTION	WEED CONTROL	DECOMPOSITION RATE	TIPS FOR USING MULCH
stone	2-4 in.	fair	fair	negligible	permanent mulch, adds some trace elements
landscape fabric	1 layer	good	good	slow, lasts several years	use in permanent beds, cover with top mulch
plastic	1-6 mil.	excellent	best	no decomposition	adds nothing; black is good for heating soil

HOW MUCH MULCH DO I NEED?

Most mulch is sold in cubic yards. Here's a formula to figure out how much you need:

1. Multiply your garden's length by the width (in feet) to find the area's square footage.
2. Check the chart above to see how deep the mulch should be.
3. Multiply the area of your garden in square feet (from #1) by the depth of mulch in inches (from #2).
4. Divide the number you get (from #3) by 324. This is the number of cubic yards of mulch that you need.

