

Winter Mulching 101

By Susan Camp

We are well into October and the days are shorter and the nights cooler. The leaves are beginning to change color and many have already fallen. It is time for fall planting and putting the garden to bed for the winter. Trees, shrubs, and perennials will remain dormant during the colder months, but just like people, they need protection from winter winds and frozen ground.

In other words, it is time to mulch. Our gardens need mulch in winter to insulate them from low temperatures and to help prevent trees and shrubs from heaving out of frozen ground. Frost heaving damages roots, and trees and shrubs must be replanted as quickly as possible after heaving if they are to survive. If the ground is frozen, it may be impossible to save them. Low temperatures and cold winds can cause desiccation, or drying, of leaves and branches. A layer of mulch will allow plants to retain water at the root level and help prevent dehydration. Winter mulching also will keep the soil warmer and encourage earlier spring growth.

A variety of mulching products is available, making it difficult to decide which type of mulch is most appropriate for a garden's needs. Inorganic materials include crushed stone or gravel, plastics, and polypropylene or polyester geotextiles. Inorganic mulches do not provide nutrients to the soil and are best used for walkways. Stone or gravel may contain high limestone content and damage acid-loving plants by raising the pH of the soil. Organic mulches are composed of plant material. Over time, organic mulches break down and add nutrients to the soil. Mulches also reduce erosion. Winter mulches should be applied before the ground has frozen. Many types of organic mulches are available at garden centers and nurseries, through county or municipal landfills, and even in our own yards.

Mulches made from pine, cypress, or hardwood byproducts are commonly used. Shredded bark and bark chunks are heavy enough to resist blowing away and don't compact to form an impermeable crust. Cypress mulch decomposes slowly, decreasing the need for frequent reapplication. Wood chips from various trees make attractive mulch as they weather to silvery-gray, but they must be aged or composted to prevent toxicity to plants. Sawdust is another alternative and is beneficial to acid-loving plants, but it forms a crust that repels water and weeds sprout easily through it. Sawdust decomposes slowly, taking nitrogen from the soil. Knowing the source for all of these wood products is important, as mulch should not be made from treated wood.

Straw is inexpensive and a good insulator, but it may contain crop seeds and is a fire hazard. If you decide to use straw, make sure it isn't hay, which contains weed seeds. Straw around trees and shrubs attracts cute, fuzzy, woodland critters that munch on leftover seeds and then attack the tree bark. Pine straw is a better choice, and often free, as most of us living on the Middle Peninsula have a few pine trees on our property. Pine straw insulates and conserves water and decomposes slowly. It is attractive in natural areas, especially around acid-loving plants like

azaleas and rhododendrons. Pine straw can cause nitrogen deficiency in plants, resulting in yellow leaves and stunted growth. Fallen leaves can be mowed and used as turf mulch without damaging the grass. Damage to your back and shoulders is also reduced, as raking and bagging leaves are no longer necessary.

Buckwheat, cottonseed, and cocoa hulls are available as mulch, but they are expensive and wash or blow away in winter storms. The high phosphorus content of cocoa hulls is toxic to some plants. Coir pith, also called cocopeat, is a fibrous material extracted from coconut hulls, marketed as a mulching material and growing medium.

Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Publications 430-019 and 430-521 and pamphlets “Mulching for a Healthy Landscape” and “Landscaping for Less in the Landfill” provide more detailed information on mulching materials.

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