

## Gardening Mulch

Very Thankfully, now with abundant soil moisture, our gardening thoughts turn towards managing the moisture. With many gardening plants established, soil splash can cause problems, as soil borne pathogens are often bounced onto the lower lying plant leaves, giving increased opportunity for fungal or bacterial infection to occur. Mulch provides a barrier which interferes with this splash.

Mulching may provide one of the most valuable practices available to gardeners. Use of organic materials can provide many beneficial effects. Mulch controls unwanted grasses and weeds, thus eliminating the need for cultivation and resulting root damage, as well as retention of soil moisture. Mulch also stabilizes soil so that runoff is decreased and soil erosion lessened. Cleaner, more easily harvested crops, the reduction of fruit rot, and easier movement through the garden during very wet periods are also benefits of mulch.

Some of the more common forms of mulch include sawdust, wood chips, cotton seed hulls, straw, leaves, hay, lawn clippings, and bark. Composted materials also make good mulch. The benefit of organic mulches, especially those like straw and compost, at the end of growing season, they are turned into the soil, and add valuable nutrients and tilth to the soil.

One word of caution where sawdust is used as mulch. As the sawdust decomposes during its life as mulch, it will use some of the soil nitrogen which would normally be available to plants, thus, mixing one pound of actual Nitrogen per five bushels of sawdust will provide needed decomposition N for the sawdust.

Also, mulching during the heat of summer, not only conserves valuable moisture available to plants, but also stabilizes soil temperatures. Research indicates summer mulched areas can stabilize soil temperatures at one inch by as much as 20 degrees, thus eliminating the stress of late afternoon heat spikes on plant roots.

Sometimes special effect inorganic mulches are used such as fabric weed barriers, or aluminum foils or laminates. Also, certain kinds of insects (leaf hopper, spider mites, and aphids) may be repelled depending on the intensity of reflected light to the underside of the plant foliage.

Please feel free to stop by the office or contact me if I can be of assistance.

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