



Mulch plays important role in gardening

Mulch serves a multitude of purposes in the landscape. First, it looks good. A mulched garden looks tidier and is more attractive. Also, mulch is available in a variety of materials, textures and colors.

On the practical side, mulch conserves water, impedes weed growth and acts as a barrier against certain pests. A healthy layer of mulch helps prevent weed growth by limiting light and smothering weed seedlings. It also prevents air-borne weed seeds from becoming established in the soil.

Did you know mulch protects plants from soil-borne diseases by preventing rainfall and irrigation water from splashing pathogens onto the plants? In the same way, it can keep fruits like strawberries and tomatoes clean by preventing mud from splashing up onto fruits during a rain event.

Not only does mulch protect soils and reduce soil compaction, it helps reduce erosion due to wind and rain. It also reduces soil temperature by shading it in the hot Oklahoma summers. On the flip side, much provides insulation in the winter from cold winds. These temperature-regulating effects help encourage root growth in plants.

Trees also benefit from mulch because it protects the stem and root surface from garden tools such as string trimmers, edgers and lawn mowers.

Predators such as arthropods like to hide under mulch during the day, then feed on a variety of garden pests during the cooler evenings. Most are nocturnal and feed on a variety of prey including caterpillars, snails, aphids, maggots, and other beetles. Lift a rock or move aside the mulch in the garden and you're likely to see a ground beetle scurry away.

Arachnids also benefit from mulches. Although some gardeners aren't big fans of spiders, these eight-legged creatures are great predators and are of great benefit in the landscape.

Mulch is available in organic and inorganic varieties. Organic mulches are by far most common in an ornamental garden and include cut grasses, leaves, straw, hay, wood chips, bark, animal manures, plant debris or newspapers. A big benefit of organic mulch is that it decomposes over time, adding organic material to and improving the soil. Organic matter loosens soils, which improves the root growth, increases the infiltration of water, and improves the soil's water-holding capacity. Decomposed mulch contributes nutrients to the soil that can be utilized by plants.

Inorganic mulches such as plastic and aluminum foil aren't widely used in a home landscape. They can, however, become beneficial in the vegetable garden. Different colored mulches are used to control a variety of pests. Reflective, aluminum mulch reflects sunlight and confuses and repels flying insects from coming onto the plants. Studies show that red plastic mulch repels root maggots and other flies, while blue reflection confuses winged aphids and thrips. Black plastic mulch discourages sowbugs and other crawling pests that cannot withstand the heat and also helps in managing leafminers.

Experiment with different types of mulch in the landscape to find what works best in your landscape.

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