

Gardening Tips

From the West Caldwell Environmental Commission

ABOUT MULCHING

No matter what the weathermen say the calendar tells us that spring is here and the gardening season is upon us. Since gardening and landscaping in general play an important role in community beautification, the West Caldwell Environmental Commission would like to offer periodically, through this medium, gardening tips that have proven to be beneficial and environmentally sound. The selected topic for this installment is “About Mulching.”

For new gardeners or those not familiar with the term, a garden mulch is any material spread on the soil surface to modify the environment where plants are growing. The materials used can be natural, or synthetic, and can be used in any number of combinations. The natural products may be found at garden supply dealers in varying textures, sizes and colors ranging from natural to those dyed red and black. They can be purchased in bags for use in small areas, or in bulk for large properties. The synthetic materials, which would include black plastic, landscape fabric, and burlap, may be purchased in similar locations.

Now that you know what mulches are, the next question is “why should you use them?” The benefits are many as listed below:

- Reduce water loss from soil through evaporation.
- Keeps soil cool during hot summer months.
- Controls or suppresses weeds.
- Eliminates soil erosion during heavy rain.
- Prevents mud from splashing up on flowers and vegetables
- Provides a decorative yet natural look to the garden.
- Upon decomposing adds nutrients to the soil (organic mulches)

Some of the more common natural materials that are available and may be used are listed below along with some pertinent comments.

Redwood and Pine Barks. These come in a variety of sizes, which allows for varying textures in the landscape. They are slow to decompose.

Wood Chips. Usually available in bulk form. Slow to decompose.

Cocoa, Buckwheat and Cottonseed Hulls. May be blown away in high wind, somewhat costly and not always available. Fairly good decomposition.

Peat Moss. An excellent soil additive, but has shortcomings as a mulch because it can blow away or be washed away in heavy rains.

Straw. Good for vegetable gardens and plant beds where it can be incorporated into the soil at seasons end. It often contains weed seeds.

Salt Hay. An excellent mulch material is best used when seeding a new lawn. Unlike regular hay or straw it contains no weed seeds.

Grass Clippings. Must be dried and should not be used more than one inch thick. Can have an

unpleasant odor. If very fresh, could heat up and damage plants. May contain herbicides. When matted could prevent water penetration. On the plus side, rapid decomposition can add nutrients to the soil.

The depth that mulches should be applied will vary with conditions. Generally, a two to three inch depth is recommended, however, on poorly drained soils they should not exceed two inches. Coarser textured mulches may be placed a bit deeper due to better air movement into the soil, while finer textured mulches may need only a one or two inch layer. It is also a good idea to reduce the depth or keep the mulch materials away completely from the base of plants where they enter the soil. This will lessen the chance of rotting at that point. Finally, it may be best not to apply mulches on very wet soils because they may cause a more unfavorable condition.

Although it has become popular, a mountain of mulch piled high against tree trunks is not a recommended practice. When mulch is piled near tree trunks, gas exchange decreases, stressing and ultimately killing the inner bark tissue. Inner bark death may also occur when pop-up sprinkler heads continually saturate the mulch placed against plant trunks. Once the inner bark dies, roots become malnourished and weakened with a subsequent reduction in water and nutrient uptake. The entire health of the plant is thus affected.

While the use of mulches may not be the answer to all your garden problems, they can go a long way in helping you achieve the results you are looking for. In the process, they may reduce some of the labor associated with mid-summer gardening such as weeding and watering.

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