

Gardening Techniques - Mulching

One of the gardening techniques that most confuses beginners, and more experienced gardeners, is Mulching. There is much discussion, muttering and head shaking over this process which has its origins lost in the mists of time. So what is it? In a nutshell, mulching is putting a thick layer of material over the soil around your plants. That is simple enough, the debate comes when discussing the best materials, and that has to be a matter of personal choice. Organic matter blended into heavy or clay soil will break it up and improve drainage and fertility. The same organic material mixed into light, sandy soils will help it hold water and improve fertility. Inorganic mulches such as plastic shreadings, and stones or chippings will do little for the fertility of the soil but will help conserve water. One of the main reasons for using mulches as an important gardening technique is that it does preserve moisture in your garden, as water becomes a more expensive and scarce resource we need to make the most of it. The natural increase in fertility of a well mulched soil also saves on buying expensive fertilizers and the added benefit of weed reduction saves not only time and money but also an aching back!

Inorganic mulches are not commonly used unless from an aesthetic point of view as they do little to improve the soil structure in the long term, though they do help with weed control and water retention. You can use materials such as shredded plastic, stone chippings, geotextiles, gravel and landscape fabrics. Organic matter is a reservoir of plant nutrients and provides a perfect environment for earthworms and other beneficial soil organisms. Compost, well rotted manure, bark chips or even shredded papers mixed with other materials are all good mulches. You can also use straw, hay, wood chips, leaves and grass clippings if you compost them first and add extra nitrogen. Decomposing leaves are an excellent mulch and you can use grass clippings though like paper, they need to be mixed with other materials and ideally composted a little first. Straw makes a fantastic mulch for the vegetable garden but do watch out for weeds and it often harbors them. Shredded Bark mulch is made from either soft or hard wood trees, it tends to bleach in the sun giving an uneven and untidy appearance. If you mix it with Cocoa Shell that keeps it looking nicer but you must soak any cocoa shell mulch as it contains some chemicals which can be harmful to pets if ingested in large quantities.

Mulching your garden is relatively easy. If you are using an inorganic mulch then either follow the manufacturer's instructions or place a layer about one inch thick. Organic mulches need to be about six inches thick as they will decompose and disappear surprisingly quickly, enriching the soil in the process. You will need to replace an organic mulch about twice a year. It is important that the soil is warm when you mulch. The bacteria within the soil and the mulch are constantly releasing nutrients and if the temperature is too low this process will stop. Putting a good mulch on before the winter sets in reduces the temperature changes in the soil that cause stress to perennial plants so they will thrive better.

The benefits of mulching are easy to see. The soil remains healthier and has a constant supply of new nutrients being gently released into it at nature's own pace. It is much easier to put a good layer of mulch over the garden than to spend hours working in fertilizers. Weed control is much easier as their light supply is cut off causing them to die back or if they do get through they become leggy and weak and can easily be removed without disturbing the roots of your plants and crops. They won't be using up precious nutrients either. The most beneficial effect is in keeping the moisture where it is needed. Soil under mulch is generally cool and moist to the touch. You won't have to water so much and it maintains a constant environment for your plants even in the summer months.

Mulches can be bought but good garden husbandry will often provide you with most of what you need, compost everything you can including grass cuttings, mix shredded paper in with them to make them a little lighter. What you can't compost, shred. The investment in a shredder will soon repay you. This simple gardening technique will save you a fortune and make your garden healthy and easier to manage.

About the Author

Lizzie Westerley has spent many pleasurable years developing her garden and her gardening skills. You can find more of her insights and information on how to make your garden equally magnificent at [The Garden Magazine](#)

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