



HOW-TO: MULCHING

Mulch is a protective layer of material placed around plants. Mulching can provide many benefits to plants and soil, and is often used in organic farming and gardening systems.



STRAW MULCH BETWEEN BEDS OF KALE, WITH LIVING MULCH IN THE BEDS



A HOME GARDEN MULCHED WITH STRAW

WHY MULCH?

Gardens benefit from a layer of mulch almost any time of year. Mulching supports soil and plants during the growing season, and can continue to add organic matter and prevent soil erosion in the months when the garden is dormant. Here are some of the ways that mulch improves the garden:

- **Weed Suppression** Mulch can smother weeds and keep them from getting the light that they need to grow.
- **Moisture Conservation** Mulch keeps water from evaporating quickly from garden soil, keeping a more constant level of soil moisture.
- **Disease Prevention** Mulch decreases the amount of soil that splashes onto plant leaves, reducing the spread of soil-borne disease.
- **Soil Improvement** Mulches made from organic materials break down, adding organic matter to the soil.
- **Soil Retention** Mulch reduces the amount of soil that erodes from the garden.

MULCH MATERIALS

A wide variety of materials make good mulch. Organic materials offer the most benefits to the garden. Here are some commonly-used mulch materials:

- Straw
- Hay – get good quality alfalfa hay or hay that was baled before it developed seeds, to avoid weed problems! Hay bales left out to rot may be used; pull apart and place sheets of hay on the garden.
- Grass clippings (from an un-sprayed lawn) – make sure these are dry before adding to the garden or they may burn plants.
- Dry leaves
- Spent mash from brewing beer
- Bark mulch – best for walkways and perennial plants
- Wood chips – best for walkways and perennial plants
- Cardboard
- Newspaper (non-glossy)
- Burlap

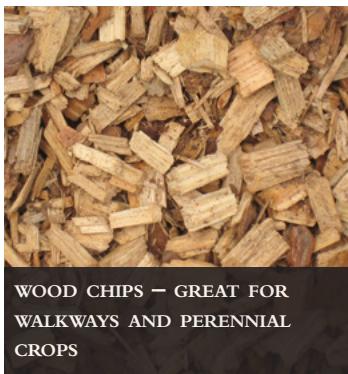
Black plastic is sometimes used by farmers to warm the beds in the spring and keep weeds at bay. Black plastic, landscape fabric, or biodegradable black paper can be used on a smaller scale in the garden. However these mulching materials don't provide the soil-building benefits that organic mulches offer, and they need to be placed over drip-tape irrigation systems.



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HEAD LETTUCE MULCHED WITH STRAW



WOOD CHIPS – GREAT FOR WALKWAYS AND PERENNIAL CROPS

Coffee grounds can be used as mulch and will not harm plants, but may form a water-repelling barrier if they dry out completely. For best results, add coffee grounds as an amendment before covering with another type of mulch.

HOW TO MULCH

Consider adding compost, fertilizer, and/or amendments to the garden before mulching.

TO MULCH A GARDEN THAT IS ACTIVELY GROWING:

1. Wait until the crops are at least several inches high, so they do not get buried in mulch.
2. Hand weed and/or hoe around crops to remove small weeds.
3. For gardens with heavy weed pressure, start with a layer of cardboard, burlap, or newspaper (wetted to keep it from blowing away), to provide an extra level of weed protection.
4. Add a thick (4-6") layer of mulch, keeping it a few inches away from the stems of the crops, to avoid drawing rodents and slugs to the plants. If you are mulching young trees, cover their trunks with a trunk protector. Add mulch as needed throughout the season.

TO MULCH A DORMANT GARDEN OR TO PREPARE FOR WINTER:

1. Remove spent plants and large weeds. Remove small weeds with a hoe, as necessary.
2. If lots of weeds tend to grow in the area you are mulching, start with a layer of cardboard, burlap, or newspaper, wetting down the newspaper.
3. Add a thick (4-6") layer of mulch.

Alternatively, large tarps or landscape fabric can be used as an over-wintering mulch. Weigh them down with rocks or bricks, or push landscape staples through the edges. They will suppress weed growth until planting time.

MULCHING TIPS

- Don't mulch onion family crops, if possible. Onions and scallions do not grow well when mulched. Mulch garlic over the winter, then remove or reduce the mulch in the spring.
- If mulching draws slugs to your garden, use an organic iron phosphate product to reduce their numbers.
- Mulch may be reused, unless the plants it surrounded were diseased.
- Some farmers and gardeners incorporate living mulch beneath their crops. Living mulch means cover crops planted below food crops suppress weeds. Some also offer Nitrogen to the soil, like low-growing white clover that thrives underneath larger crops like corn or tomatoes.