



Homes & Gardens

Town Tribune Weekly Guide To Spring Living

What Is Mulch? How to Use 8 Types in Your Garden

Mulch is a material that gardeners use to cover the surface of the soil, and it offers many benefits like retaining moisture, suppressing weeds, and keeping soil temperatures stable. Besides protecting plants, mulch also enhances the appearance of garden beds and landscapes. While some types of mulch can also add nutrients to the soil, all varieties help prevent frost heaving in winter and support plant root health.

Types of Mulch:

Mulches can be aesthetic or functional and fall into two categories: organic and inorganic, each with its own pros and cons.

- **Organic mulch:** This natural substance is not made of anything synthetic and is the best option for adding beneficial nutrients to your garden. It can suppress weeds, but it doesn't permanently block weeds. In general, organic mulches are best for vegetable gardens.
- **Inorganic mulch:** This type is a synthetic material. It is the best option for entirely blocking weeds and retaining water. Inorganic mulch lasts longer than organic mulch but doesn't add nutrients to the soil.

Tip: The best time to apply mulch is in spring when the weather is warm or in fall to con-

serve moisture and protect soils. Mulch after weeding and after removing old mulch.

Organic Mulch:

Organic mulch, made from natural ingredients, will decompose and must be replaced, enriching the soil's structure, drainage, and organic content. Drier, woodier mulch decomposes slower and offers fewer nutrients.

Each type of organic mulch has its own use; here are popular sources:

- Bark, shredded, or chipped
- Pine needles
- Grass clippings
- Newspaper
- Shredded leaves
- Straw

Warning: Ensure your mulch source is safe, as it may contain weed seeds or harmful chemicals.

Bark:

Bark mulches are best used around trees and shrubs and in garden beds where you won't be doing much digging. They are also good for front walkways and foundation plantings. These woody mulches don't mix well into the soil, and it can become a hassle to keep moving them aside to make way for new plants. However, they will last longer than finer organic mulches.

Pine Needles:

Pine needles, also known as pine straw (pine needles harvested after they've fallen), may slightly lower the pH of the soil, but not enough to cause plant problems. The caution with using fresh green pine needles is that they can add more acidity to the soil, but it may still be negligible. Pine needles are a good choice if you are looking for a mulch that will not become compacted but suppresses weeds and keeps moisture in the soil.

Grass Clippings:

Grass clippings are best suited for remote areas of your garden where you want to suppress weeds. They have a high water content and decompose very rapidly. Grass clippings can get slimy with an unpleasant odor, so use them cautiously. Grass clippings also tend to get matted and can form a barrier preventing water penetration to the soil.

Ideally, a mulching lawnmower distributes clippings on the lawn, adding fertility to the soil. Use your grass clippings on unplanted areas to enrich the soil, or dump them in a compost bin. However, do not compost or use grass clipping treated with herbicides or pesticides.

Newspaper:

Newspapers are a popular mulch option. Most newspapers have switched to soy-based black inks and hydrogen peroxide for bleaching pulp, both eco-friendly enhancements. Avoid using newspapers with colored or glossy inks as mulch. 4 Layered sheets of newspapers can suppress weeds, control soil temperatures, and help retain moisture.

To use it in the garden: Spread a layer of four to eight sheets of newspaper around the plants. Moisten the sheets and cover the newspaper with 1 to 3 inches of another organic mulch. The weed protection should last throughout the growing season. Use newspaper in lasagne gardening, as well.

Shredded Leaves:

Shredded leaves are nature's favorite mulch since they are free and can be used anywhere. Leaves also entice more earthworms to your garden soil. Some gardeners don't like the look of leaves in their gardens, and some leaf covers don't look great in a formal setting. But if you spread a layer before plants spread out in the spring, the leaf mulch tends to blend in with the soil quickly.

Shredded leaves are perfect for woodland gardens, and if you spread a layer over your vegetable garden in the fall, it will begin decomposing over the winter. However, unshredded leaves will mat together and repel water in rainy areas. If that happens, rake and fluff them up a bit if they appear to get matted.

Straw and Hay:

Straw and salt hay are popular mulches for the vegetable garden. They keep the soil and soil-borne diseases from splashing up on lower plant leaves and make paths less muddy. Straw decomposes very slowly and will last the entire growing season. It also makes a nice home for spiders and other beneficial insects that will move in and help keep the pest population in control. Finally, it's easy to either rake up or work into the soil when it's time to plant a new crop or put the vegetable garden to bed.

Inorganic Mulch:

Synthetic and inorganic mulches do an excellent job of holding moisture and blocking weeds. They don't add any nutrients to the soil but don't decompose quickly or require replacing as often as organic mulches.

- Plastic and landscape fabric
- Gravel and stone

Plastic and Landscape Fabric:

Plastic and landscape fabric are suitable for foundation plantings, shrubs, and trees. These plants don't require frequent fertilization, and you won't be working in these beds regularly, so you don't want to worry about weeding them throughout the summer.

If you like the functionality of plastic or landscape fabric but not the look, add a thin layer of bark mulch on top of the plastic or fabric for camouflage and replace the bark as it disintegrates. Similarly, artificial grass carpets can be used in the same way.

- **Plastic:** A downside to plastic is it gets hot in the summer. Besides smothering weed seeds, it can also kill all the good things in the soil, including trailing plant roots and microbes. If necessary, cut holes in the plastic fabric to

allow sufficient water to pass through if you see puddles accumulate on top of the plastic. Another downside is that as plastic decomposes, it can harm the soil and the environment.

- **Landscape fabric:** This fabric is usually a better option since it is porous and shouldn't be a problem unless it gets blocked, causing drainage issues. Landscape fabric is generally thinner and decomposes better than plastic. It's sometimes made of natural materials, making it a better choice than plastic as an eco-friendly choice. After a few years, as it decomposes, it will allow weeds through it.

- **Raised beds:** Plastic and landscape sheets can be used to make raised beds. Consider making them the width of your plastic or fabric so you can cover the bed without seams. However, if you're an organic gardener, you may want to forgo plastic in vegetable beds, which can contaminate the soil as it breaks down.

Gravel and Stone:

Gravel and stone work well as mulches in areas that require good drainage or beds with plants that like a little additional heat, like Mediterranean herb gardens and rain gardens. Stone is hard to remove, so give it a lot of thought before using it as a mulch. Gravel and stone are also sometimes used to cover up plastic or landscape sheeting.

FAQ

- **What is the purpose of mulching?**

Mulching serves several purposes, like retaining soil moisture, maintaining consistent soil temperatures, reducing weed growth, and enhancing the garden's appearance.

- **What are the disadvantages of mulching?**

Mulch can block new plants from growing and stop seeds from reseeding naturally. It can also attract some garden pests like slugs. Some inorganic mulches can release substances that may upset the natural ecosystem balance.

Darren K. Ruddy
PAINTING AND
WALLPAPERING SPECIALIST

Serving Fairfield County Since 1979



Interior & Exterior
Residential & Commercial
Driveway Sealing • Power Washing
References Available
Free Estimates

Reasonable Rates
Professional Quality
Workmanship Guaranteed

Window Repair

ASK FOR
15% DISCOUNT
AFTER
ESTIMATE IS
GIVEN
BEFORE
5/31/26



A+ Rated
Member
Of The Better
Business Bureau
Awarded 10 years
of Excellent
Service.

A New Fairfield Resident With A Record Of No Unsatisfied Customers

Office 203-431-4929

TJ's Outdoor Services inc.
TREE SERVICES AND LANDSCAPING



SPRING HAS ARRIVED!

Still time to prune your ormentals, trees and evergreens!
Also prune back your white pines to save them from ice and snow next year or from this year's damage.

USING LOW IMPACT 72 FT. BUCKET ON TRACKS AROUND YOUR HOUSE AND YARD, ON POOL DECKS, WALKWAYS, ETC.

WE PROVIDE COMPLETE TREE AND SHRUB CARE

Pruning • Cabling • Removals • Stump Grinding • Log Removal
Wood Splitting • Shrub & Tree Planting • Bug Control
Equipment: 75 ft Bucket and Truck
72 ft Track Lift Chipper Logging Trailer Stump Grinder

Fully Insured and Licensed By The State of Connecticut
Member CTPA
Certification of Insurance Upon Request
Licensed Ct Arborist • Lic # 5-4259

203-746-0026



ON YOUR JOB EVERYDAY UNTIL COMPLETION...
GUARANTEED



Southeast Kitchen & Bath LLC

DESIGN • BUILD • REMODEL • SINCE 1973

SHOWROOMS

101 GREENWOOD AVE. BETHEL, CT 06801 | 203-748-9000
19 OLD DOANSBURG RD. BREWSTER, NY 10598 | 845-278-0070

CT LIC. #HIC0646102 | WESTCHESTER LIC. #29185-H16 | PUTNAM LIC. #PC7152

www.southeastkitchenandbath.com 