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Mulch

Over time, mulch around your landscape plants may be raked away with shrub trimmings or become intermingled with the soil. Replenishing this layer of protection in the summer is vital because mulch helps your soil retain moisture, protects roots, moderates soil temperature, discourages weeds, and guards tree trunks from damage by wayward mowers and trimmers. It also helps your landscape by attracting earthworms and essential microorganisms.

A good mulch mixture can consist of shredded hardwood bark or cypress, pine needles, and pine bark nuggets. However, too much mulch can injure ornamental plants, so don't overdo it. For shrubs, trees and ground covers, use a one-to-three inch layer of mulch. A one-inch layer is ideal for most ornamental plants.

If you're looking for a way to save lots of time in the garden, look no further. Mulching your flower beds will drastically reduce the amount of time spent weeding, watering and fighting pests. Mulch also improves the appearance of your garden, and keeps dirt from splashing up on your flowers and vegetables when it rains.

If possible, consider using organic mulch. Organic mulches are those that used to be living material, such as bark, straw, leaves, grass clippings and pine needles. These organic mulches improve the soil by adding nutrients as they decompose and encouraging earthworm activity. Organic mulches aren't perfect, though. If you have problems with rodents, you may want to choose inorganic mulch. In very moist climates, organic mulches may hold too much moisture. The excessive moisture will encourage slugs and snails, and may even cause the stems of your plants that come in contact with the mulch to rot.

Below is a list which contains some of the more common Pacific Northwest mulches.

Mixed Bark

Appearance: Good
Insulation: Good
Cost: Moderate
Thickness: 2-3 in.
Weed Control: Good
Water Penetration: Good
Moisture Retention: Good
Decomposition Speed: Slow
Comments: Should be replaced every two years.

Compost

Appearance: Fair
Insulation: Good
Cost: High; supply usually limited
Thickness: 1-3 in.
Weed Control: Good
Water Penetration: Good if well rotted
Moisture Retention: Good
Decomposition Speed: Rapid, adds nutrients
Comments: Partially decomposed compost is an excellent feeding mulch.

Landscape Fabric

Appearance: Poor
Insulation: Good
Cost: High
Thickness: 1 layer
Weed Control: Good
Water Penetration: Good
Moisture Retention: Good
Decomposition Speed: Slow, can last several years
Comments: Use in permanent beds. Cover with attractive top mulch.

Peat Moss

Appearance: Good
Insulation: Good
Cost: Moderate-high
Thickness: 1 in.
Weed Control: Good
Water Penetration: Poor; absorbs much water
Moisture Retention: Poor; draws moisture from soil
Decomposition Speed: Very slow
Comments: Adds little or no nutrients to soil. Valuable only as a soil conditioner.

Wood Chips

Appearance: Good
Insulation: Good
Cost: Moderate
Thickness: 2-4 in.
Weed Control: Good
Water Penetration: Good
Moisture Retention: Good
Decomposition Speed: Fairly slow; little effect on soil nitrogen
Comments: May contain carpenter ants but does not retain tree diseases.