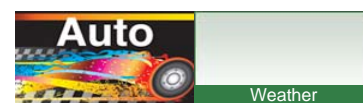


The Community VOICE



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Mulch: What is it? Why use it? How do you use it?



By Christopher Harrod June 14, 2013 12:00 am

With the rise of the suburban landscapes, there has been an increased focus on manicured landscaping. When leaves fall on the ground or lawn, they are raked, bagged and taken off site.

These leaves would naturally provide the soil with what would be considered "organic mulch," (I'll explain later).

Mulch is any material you put on top of the soil, which include leaves to help reduce evaporation, increase organic matter in the soil and improve drainage.

In our Mediterranean climate where we have no rain in the summer, mulch should be in wide use, helping conserve California's precious water.

Why use mulch? First of all, it's putting money back into your pocket by saving you on your water bill.

It also provides organic matter that eventually breaks down to humus, which provides nutrients and stimulates biological activity.

Organic matter improves soil drainage in clay soils and increases water-holding capacity in sandy soils. Mulches also help to reduce weeds by smothering and blocking sunlight to seeds. In addition, mulch makes it a whole lot easier to pull weeds because the soil becomes nice and loose over time.

What are the different types of mulches? They are mainly divided into three categories: organic, inorganic and living. Organic mulches would include wood chips, straw, newspaper, etc. Inorganic mulches would include rocks like river stones, sand or lava rocks. Living mulches are plants, mostly plants that spread and form a dense cover above the soil. They are also called cover crops when used in agriculture. A few plants I recommend include comfrey, fava beans, clover, thyme and low-growing California natives such as manzanita (*Arctostaphylos* sp.) or California Lilac (*Ceanothus* sp.).

California Lilac and manzanita are the most drought and deer resistant. While, comfrey (high in potassium) can be cut multiple times throughout the season for nutrient rich mulch. If you're looking to learn more about all the varieties of mulch available, books and online resources are great tools.

There are lots of choices when it comes to choosing mulch for your yard. How do you choose the right one for your landscape? The organic and living mulches provide the most benefits. Inorganic mulches do not provide organic matter or many nutrients, but they look and work great when used with succulents, cacti and other seaside and desert plants. Straw is great for vegetable gardens because it breaks down relatively fast creating humus quickly. For orchards, you may want to go with wood chips cut into different sizes that will provide weed control for a longer period.

Pine needles and oak leaves work great for acid loving plants. With of all of the options there are for mulch, there is sure to be one to work well in your situation.

There are certain guidelines to take into account when applying mulch to your landscape. First of all, it's important not to cover the crown of the plant because this can cause moisture to build up around the trunk, which can result in crown rot.

Horticulturalists have different opinions on how thick the layer of mulch should be. Through my experience and research, I believe a couple inches or less is all you need in most situations.

If mulching summer vegetables, wait until mid-spring, applying sooner can cause the soil to trap in cold air. Also, be sure to water thoroughly after you apply because sometimes the material can be very dry, acting as a barrier to water.

Finding materials for mulch in Sonoma County is easy, local soil yards like Sonoma Compost will usually have a few options to choose from. Also, at local nurseries, you can find bagged mulch. Wood chips are sometimes offered for free on sites such as Craigslist and Freecycle.

The easiest option would be to let the leaves and branches from your own plants decompose on site. The last method doesn't require you to get in your car or pull out the rake on your day off.

Christopher Harrod is an environmentalist, horticulturalist, novice mycologist and freelancer. An SSU alumnus who promotes the stewardship of our environment, he has served as an intern and is now a volunteer with the Cotati Creek Critters (cotaticreekcritters.info). For more information, links, and to visit his blog, go to www.wildcjh.com.

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