



METRO CREATIVE PHOTO

There are many varieties of mulches to use.

# Making the most of mulch

## Covering soil with wood chips or other materials helps protect landscape plants

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Master Gardener

**Q**uestion: I've heard some things about using mulch in my landscape. Can you tell me what the benefits are and what kind of mulch to use?

**Answer:** Applying mulch is one of the smartest things you can do for your landscape plants. First of all, let's define "mulching." This is the practice of covering soil with a layer of organic or inorganic material in order to conserve water, reduce weeds, improve soil quality and enhance plant growth. If applied now in the fall, mulch protects the soil from compaction by winter rains. Mulching around landscape trees can protect the tree from weed eaters and lawnmowers by providing a buffered area away from lawn equipment. Young trees thrive when mulched in a lawn setting due to reduced root competition from turf and supplying higher nitrogen levels.

There are many varieties of mulches to use. The most common is organic wood chips or shredded bark, but you can also use pine needles,

shredded leaves, partially decomposed compost and dry grass clippings. Or you can top woven landscape fabrics with small rocks – though caution must be used as rock can absorb enough sunlight to alter the soil temperature unfavorably.

The most common bark products are Douglas fir and hemlock. They can be purchased in bags or by the truckload at various local retailers. A few companies offer delivery service to your residence and can also apply it directly to your landscape using a hose. There are various sizes, colors and grades to choose from. Wood chips are made from the heartwood of a tree instead of the bark and are often used to line pathways or as ground cover for playgrounds. Wood chips break down faster and turn from a light color to gray as they age.

The best times to apply mulch are in the spring and in the fall. Fall applications can smother winter annual weeds, decrease runoff and increase soil water retention in preparation for the following summer. Apply mulch 2 to 3 inches around your plants



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**Applying mulch is one of the smartest things you can do for your landscape plants.**

to smother annual weeds. When applying mulch around

a shrub or tree, leave the area around the crown free

of mulch. If piled around the trunk, this increases the risk of fungal or bacterial disease as well as encouraging rodents to feast on the bark of the tree or shrub.

If applying mulch for the first time, it's best to thoroughly remove all weeds from the area around the plants, then apply layers of newspaper and/or corrugated cardboard before spreading the wood chips or shredded bark on top. The newspaper and cardboard act as a good barrier to weed germination and eventually decompose into the soil.

So go out there and make your landscape plants happy this fall by giving them a good layer of mulch. They'll thank you for it come spring.

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*Do you have a gardening question? Please email, call, or visit the Douglas County Master Gardeners Plant Clinic at [douglasmg@oregonstate.edu](mailto:douglasmg@oregonstate.edu), 541- 236-3052, or 1134 S.E. Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.*