

MULCH SELECTION

Below is a list of the mulches demonstrated by number in the Extension Demonstration Garden Mulch section including the pros and cons of each type:

1. **Hardwood Mulch**—Hardwood mulch is a shredded composition of hardwood branches and trimmings. It is a very desirable mulch for home landscapes in that it is attractive, very good for the soil condition, and readily available. This type of mulch should be aged before using.

2. **Pine Bark Mulch (large nuggets)** - Pine Bark mulch offers outstanding effectiveness and appearance. It is available from garden centers by the yard (and 1/2 yard) or by the bag (usually 3 cu. ft.). This type mulch is especially good for use around shrubs, trees, and some larger perennials. Do not incorporate this mulch into the soil, as it may cause a nitrogen deficiency in the top layers of soil.

3. **Pine Bark Mulch (small nuggets)** - See information listed for Pine Bark Mulch (large nuggets). The small nuggets are better-suited for mulching annuals, vegetables, seedlings, and herbs. This is a very attractive and suitable mulch.

4. **Raw Wood Chips** - This is the longest-lasting inorganic mulch and one of the most attractive. It gives a rustic look to the landscape and can even be used for walkways. Wood chips should not be used in foundation plantings next to a house where termites are or could be a problem. Be sure to use aged wood chips as the green wood can potentially rob the plants of nutrients as it breaks down and additional fertilizer will be needed. Do not incorporate this mulch into the soil as its high carbon content will cause a nitrogen deficiency in plants. This mulch can be obtained free from many tree services or municipal landscapers.

5. **Brick Mini-Nuggets**—This crushed brick material is readily available in the Piedmont area at selected garden centers and from stone suppliers. However, it is very rare to find this type of mulch in other localities. Like other inert mulches, it is very long-lasting and suitable for areas where mulches have a tendency to wash or blow away. It is safe to use next to foundations of homes in termite -prone areas.

6. **Pine Needles (Pine Straw)** - This is one of the most widely used mulches for residential landscaping. It is a renewable resource that is harvested each year in North Carolina. If you have Pines planted plan on creating self-mulching areas. Pine needles tend to interlock and stay in place better than most mulches. While it is slow to break down it does change color and as a result is often overused.

7. **Aged Wood Compost**—This mulch comes from hardwood trimmings that have composted over a period of time. Most of the time the hardwood is shredded or chipped to promote faster decomposition. This mulch is very suitable for home landscaping in that it improves the soil condition while it works as a very good mulch. Wood compost can be produced at home or purchased.

8. **Pea Gravel**—Pea gravel can be used alone or over a weed barrier such as black plastic. It is commonly used as a mulch for walkways and paths. This mulch tends to warm the soil, so use it for heat-loving plants. This mulch can be purchased at garden centers by the bag or from rock quarries by the ton for larger landscapes.

In summary, mulches serve a number of purposes including:

- ◇ Reducing soil moisture evaporation and ensuring a more even supply of soil moisture.
- ◇ Reducing or preventing weed growth.
- ◇ Insulating soil from extreme temperature changes.
- ◇ Preventing mud from splashing on crop surfaces.
- ◇ Reducing fruit rots (in melons, strawberries, and tomatoes).
- ◇ Reducing soil crusting.
- ◇ Reducing soil erosion.
- ◇ Reducing soil compaction.
- ◇ Protecting perennial plants and shrubs from freezing.
- ◇ Improving neatness and appearance of the garden landscape.

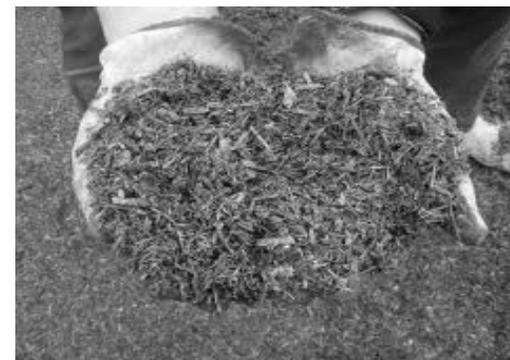
Prepared by the Guilford County Extension Master Gardener Volunteers
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MULCHES IN THE LANDSCAPE

The Cooperative Extension Service Demonstration Garden Information Booklet



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Mulches in the Landscape

ABOUT MULCHES

Using a mulch in the flower or vegetable garden may well be your most valuable garden practice. A mulch is any kind of material applied to the soil surface for protection or aesthetic improvement of the area.

The mulch may be organic, such as bark and pine needles, or inert, such as stones and polyethylene cloth.

Good mulches can reduce soil erosion, suppress weeds, keep the soil moist and cool, and, if organic, add organic matter to the soil. Plants may well grow better when mulched; however, that is likely due to improved growing conditions rather than any special growth-promoting substance in the mulch itself.

Mulches prevent loss of moisture from the soil by evaporation. Moisture moves by capillary action to the surface and evaporates if the soil is not covered. Sun and wind hasten this loss of moisture. Of course, not having to water landscapes and gardens as often saves our community's water supply. Don't forget that an organic mulch added to a container garden will help prevent evaporation.

Mulching is an excellent method for keeping weeds and grasses from invading the garden. An occasional weed may poke through the mulch, but it can be easily pulled, saving the gardener a lot of work.

Mulches keep the soil from getting hot under intense sunlight. Many plants, including those in vegetable and flower gardens, need a cool soil surface. Therefore, mulches aid in better plant growth and general health of the plant. Mulches also protect shrubs and perennials during the cold winter months.

Another good reason to use mulch is to prevent soil erosion and soil compaction. Mulches work by dissipating any falling raindrops and act as a barrier to strong winds. This benefit prevents the soil surface from crusting, and therefore improves absorption and percolation of water to the soil areas where the roots are growing.

Organic mulches are an excellent way to enrich the soil as they decompose. Also, the added nutrients from some types of mulches are very beneficial for the garden.

Mulched garden and landscaped areas are much more attractive than those that are not mulched. Mulch adds that perfect finishing touch to a landscape.



ORGANIC vs. INERT MULCHES

Organic mulches are derived from plant material. Some examples are bark chips, shredded bark, straw, grass clippings, pine needles, and compost.

Since organic materials will decompose, this type of mulch will affect both the soil and plants in many ways.

Regarding soil, organic mulches will improve and stabilize soil structure.



However, sometimes the pH level of the garden will be *slightly* affected by adding certain mulches. Pine needles, for example, may make the soil slightly more acidic over time.

One drawback to organic mulches is that weed seeds may be introduced into the garden, especially with hay, straw, or ground corncobs. Be sure that organic mulch is free of grain or seeds before using, or you may be causing more work with weeding than you may want to do.

Inert mulches are not derived from plant materials. Some examples are gravel, brick chips, pebbles, and black plastic. Various types of stone may be used for aesthetic effects. The material may be colored to blend in with the features of the home, patio, or landscape. Black plastic is popular because it is effective in preventing weeds and grass from invading the landscaping area.

Inert mulches tend to last longer, since they do not decompose. However, they do not add nutrients or improve the soil condition for the same reason. Also, inert or inorganic mulches must be removed when their purpose has been fulfilled.