

How to Select a Garden or Landscape Mulch

Choose From Living, Synthetic, Inorganic, or Organic Mulches



Benefits of Mulch

Every spring, gardeners turn to mulches for their landscapes and gardens for a variety of reasons.

- **Reduced soil erosion and compaction.**
- **Moderated soil temperatures. Soil is warmer in the winter and cooler in the summer.**
- **Weed reduction, which can help reduce pesticide use.**

What is the best mulch to use?

Research shows that arborist's wood chips provide more benefits with fewer drawbacks than other mulch choices. Due to their wide availability, wood chips are a cost-effective mulch for many different locations.

Types of Mulch

While the different mulch types have similar benefits, each type of mulch has some things to consider when choosing the best fit for a garden or landscape.

There are four different types of mulch used in landscapes and gardens – living, synthetic, inorganic, and organic. By considering the pros and cons of each type of mulch, you can choose the best option for your garden or landscape.

Living mulches

Living mulches include **ground cover** or **cover crops**. They can compete with water, light, nutrients, and space resources. In a space where these resources are limited, especially water, a non-living mulch would be a better choice.

Synthetic mulches

Synthetic mulches are any materials created by people. **Recycled rubber mats** and **chips** are typical examples. This mulch will break down slowly, so it doesn't need to be replaced as frequently. Eventually, it does decompose, which can release chemical components that are not desirable for healthy soil.



Landscape fabrics are also considered synthetic mulch. Seasonal weed control is one of the most common uses for landscape fabrics or sheets of plastic. This mulch can restrict water and air movement between the soil at the atmosphere, which can cause negative effects on plants and soil organisms. Because of these potential negative effects, landscape fabric is not ideal for long-term use.

Inorganic mulches

Inorganic mulches are materials such as **stone**, **tumbled glass**, or **concrete pavers**. They weather slowly, making them long-lasting. Research shows that rock mulch does not increase soil temperatures in the summer.



While deep stone mulch can provide weed control in the short term, it is not permanent. Weed seeds and soil blow in, resulting in a weed population that can be difficult to control without herbicides.

Organic mulches

Organic mulch is a broad group of materials such as sawdust, compost, wood chips, and nut shells. They will decompose in a relatively short time and will need to be replaced more frequently than other mulches.

Sawdust and **compost** can be used in deep layers to control weeds. Because of the fine texture, gas and water exchange can be decreased. Sawdust can tie up certain nutrients as it begins to decompose.

Wood chips, bark, and **nutshells** are coarser, which allows better air and water exchange. As these break down, some nutrients are added to the soil. Wood chips are better at absorbing and retaining water than bark and nutshells.

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Updated February 2023

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