

Mulch

What?

Mulch is an effective and protective covering which when placed around plants can prevent the evaporation of moisture, the freezing of roots and the growth of weeds

Why?

There are many benefits of using mulch in and around the garden, these include:

- deterring weeds (so you spend less time weeding!)
- decreasing pest invasion
- absorbing water and decreasing evaporation
- improving sandy and clay soils by adding organic matter
- stopping erosion
- insulating the soil, by keeping it cooler in summer and warmer in winter
- preventing soil compaction
- improving the look of your garden!

How?

There are a few things to consider when choosing your mulch:

- Function – do you need it to improve the soil and structure, conserve water, or inhibit weed growth?
- How long it will last, the ease of application, availability and cost
- Appearance – would you like the mulch to be decorative or to blend in?

There are two types of mulches: organic and inorganic

Organic mulches are made of natural substances such as lucerne, wood chips, leaves or grass clippings. They decompose over time and need to be replaced

Inorganic mulches can be made of materials such as gravel and pebbles. They do not add nutrients to the garden or break down

Organic mulches:

Lucerne – excellent for improving soil, available in bales, easy to transport, carry and spread and can last for about 3-4 months. However lucerne can contain weed seeds that may germinate

Sugar cane mulch – it is weed free but can form a water-resistant mat on the top, so ensure that the ground is well watered before application. It lasts 3-4 months, is easy to spread but it is advisable to wear a facemask to avoid breathing in the dust

Tea tree mulch – forms a closely woven but highly absorbent mat that retains soil moisture and inhibits weed growth and is weed free. A 75mm layer can last for up to 12 months

Grass Clippings – the best use for grass clippings is to leave them on the lawn. If you do want to use them as mulch, let them dry out first or compost them. They will decompose rapidly, adding nutrients back into the soil. A five centimetre layer will provide weed control if they are not full of weed seeds

Straw – decomposes rapidly, so you will have to replenish it often to keep the weeds down. Straw will improve the soil as it decays

Wood chips and pine bark – these are recycled products from plantation timbers, green waste, and post consumer wood waste. They do not add any nutrients to the soil and break down slowly. A large wood chip can last for up to two years

Leaves – A 50mm-75mm layer of leaves is a great weed suppressant. Leaves should be shredded, using a shredder or your lawn mower. They will improve the soil as they decompose

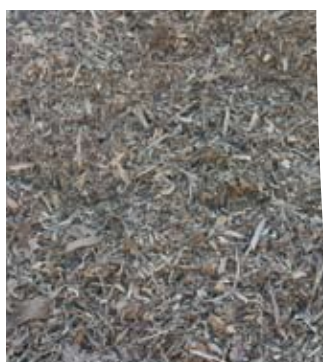
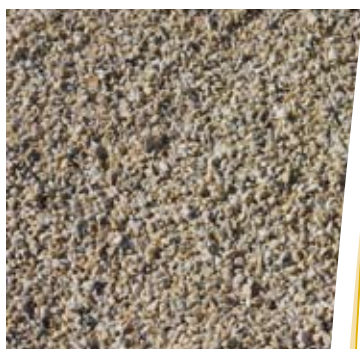
Other organic mulches include pea straw, compost, manure and mushroom compost

Inorganic mulches:

Pebbles and crushed stone – come in all shapes, colours and sizes. A 25mm layer of small rocks will provide good weed control. Do not use around acid-loving plants as they may increase alkalinity in the soil, these materials can reflect the sun and create a hot environment during summer

Recycled products – there are many recycled products now available including recycled concrete, slate, plastics and coloured road base

Mulch mat – this is made from woven fabric. It is available in various lengths and widths. It allows water and air to circulate and is effective in controlling most weeds



Mulch

Do's

- before you apply mulch give your selected area a good weed and water well, it also helps to break up the soil. Apply the mulch in a thick layer, about 75mm

Don'ts

- mulch right up to the trunks of plants
- use hay for mulch as it contains too many weed seeds

The best time to mulch new plants is right after you plant them. Around established plants mulch is best applied in early spring. Remember to replenish your garden bed with mulch from time to time, as it breaks down

Where to go?

Mulch is available at most livestock supply stores, nurseries, landscape suppliers and hardware stores

How much will it cost?

The cost for mulch will vary depending on the type you choose and the amount you want. Buying in bulk will save you money

You may want to contact a local tree lopper to see if they have a load that could be dropped off for free or at a low cost. Remember to let the load dry out before you use it

Troubleshooting?

Nitrogen drawdown is the loss of nitrogen from the soil, occurring when mulch of high carbon/low nitrogen content is used, such as woodchip. This can cause yellowing of the leaves and poor growth. Using an organic mulch will help prevent this. Ensuring your soil is well prepared before applying your mulch will also help your plants to thrive

Stem rot can occur when mulch is touching the stem or trunk of your plants

Mulch can sometimes dry and **repel water** if it is in small particles. Simply rake it to break the surface, then water it

Weeds, if these appear you can pull them out and top up the mulch if necessary

Time?

Things to do now

Start your own compost – by composting large garden waste you can use it as a mulch

Things to do in the future

Grow your own mulch – by growing a ground cover such as Native Violet, Kidney Weed, Blue Flax Lily or Ivy-leaved Violet you can cover the soil and this will act as a mulch

Want to know more?

- Get your *How to Mulch Easy Guide*
<http://www.resource.nsw.gov.au/publications.htm#easyguide>
- Speak to your local nursery, landscape supplier, hardware store or garden centre

Attend a workshop run by your your local council:

Camden	4654 7777
Campbelltown	4645 4000
Liverpool	1300 36 2170
Wollondilly	4677 1100
Macarthur Centre for Sustainable Living	4647 9828