

WHY MULCH?

Sure, mulch makes garden beds look great, but it also serves some more noble causes.

Mulch is really anything that covers the surface of soil in flower beds, organic (like pine needles or compost) or synthetic (like landscape fabric or plastic sheeting). Learning a little bit about the benefits and impact of different types of mulch will make your decision a lot easier. There are plenty of options available at your local garden center, so don't be afraid to try a couple different mulches around your yard.

Mulch isn't merely aesthetic! Here are a few more benefits of garden mulch:

- Helps prevent soil erosion
- Insulates soil in the winter
- Cools soil in the summer
- Acts as a soil amendment; breaking up compact soil
- Reduces weeds and helps prevent new weed growth

Types of Mulch

Mulches available can differ by region but these are the most common types found at most garden centers. Recommended thickness for spreading is noted by each different type. Remember, water needs to flow freely through your mulch.

Hardwood (2–3 in.): A dark mix of hardwoods is shredded once, twice or three times into an easy-to-spread texture. Hardwood mulch breaks down slowly over a couple seasons and adds nutrients to the soil. Like most mulch, it will fade in color from almost black to a lighter brown.



Cypress (2–3 in.): Lighter in color than hardwood but with a similar consistency. A lot of cypress is used in areas like Florida but it's available in many other regions throughout the United States.

Pine Bark (2 in.): Available shredded and in a variety of chip sizes, pine bark mulch is more versatile than hardwoods and the chips look great in garden beds but have a tendency to wash away in heavy rain.

Cedar (2–3 in.): Another shredded mulch, cedar has a loyal following among gardeners. It's great in rose and herb gardens and is easily worked into the soil after a season or two.

Cocoa Shell (1 in.): More expensive than shredded mulches, cocoa shell mulch is popular because of its chocolaty aroma. It should be noted that cocoa hulls have a tendency to get moldy if no air is flowing through wet shells.



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How Much Do You Need?

- 1** Figure out how much area you'll be covering—just multiply length times width of beds and add them up
- 2** Multiply the size of your garden by the depth of mulch you plan to spread (2 inches, generally)
- 3** Divide your answer by 324 and that is the number of cubic yards of mulch you need.

So, if you have 300 square feet of gardens to mulch, you will need approximately 1.8 cubic yards of mulch.

Ground Corncobs (2–3 in.): Relatively inexpensive in areas like the Midwest, corncobs are great weed barriers and retain moisture better than most mulches. Be sure to keep the mulch away from plant stems as they generate a lot of heat when decomposing.

Peanut Shells (1–2 in.): Like ground corncobs, the price can be low in some areas. The hulls decompose rapidly, adding nitrogen to your garden bed. Some gardeners mix it with other mulches like compost to keep it in place during heavy rain.

Compost (1–3 in.): Either make it yourself or buy it bagged at your local garden center, but compost is the gardener's best friend. It works well as a mulch that also feeds the soil. One thing to watch for is that you have sufficient drainage. Compost that is not rotted can really impede water from getting to your soil.

Pine Straw (1–1.5 in.): Pine straw is actually the needle of the tree and a bale of it goes a long way. It is very plentiful in some regions and makes for a good mulching material. It does decompose slowly and is best used with acid-loving plants.

When and How?

Mulch is most often applied in spring, as gardeners break out the gardening tools and prepare beds for planting. But the best time to mulch is really in the fall. Insulation is one of the major benefits of mulch and covering your soil with mulch before winter will give you a head start in spring. But you can mulch any time of the year.

The recommendations for spreading depth listed above are critical. Too little mulch will just mean you didn't get the most benefits you could have and you'll also have more weeds to pull. But spreading it too thick can lead to far worse issues. If mulch is piled around the stems of plants and even tree trunks, it will



facilitate rot and disease problems stunting or killing the plant. Thick mulch also impedes water from getting to your soil, which is bad for the plants and can result in some very ugly mold in your garden beds, too. A couple inches, max, and you will get the full benefit of your mulch.

How is up to you. Dump out the bags or dig in and do it one handful at a time. Bulk mulch is also great option if you have a bunch of beds to cover. One warning, though. If you have bulk mulch delivered, make sure you put down a tarp or you run the risk of staining your driveway. It's not permanent, but can leave an unsightly mark that will not accent your manicured garden beds. 🍃

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