

# Mulches provide many benefits for a garden

NEWARK, Del. - If the weeds in your garden seem to have more energy than you do, why not try mulching? Delaware Extension horticulturist Dr. Charles Dunham says mulches cut down on weeds and also help the home gardener in a number of other ways.

Mulches conserve water by cutting evaporation

losses, and may also help water penetrate into the soil, especially from hard showers, when most of the water normally runs off. Mulches also protect vegetables and flower plants from splashing mud and dirt. Some mulches may even help protect plants from insect damage.

Many kinds of materials make good mulches,

Dunham says. Practically anything will work, so long as it allows the penetration of water and does not pack to exclude air from the soil.

Organic mulches break down—some faster than others—thereby enriching the soil. However, Dunham cautions, if the mulch contains a high ratio of carbon to nitrogen, a temporary nitrogen shortage in

the soil could result unless extra nitrogen is added. Sawdust and straw will do this.

Where appearance is important such as around the house or in a flower bed, choose an attractive mulch. Many organic mulches provide a neat covering that makes a nice foil for flowers and shrubs.

Availability and cost are

two prime factors in the choice of a mulch.

Bark and wood chips are ideal mulches, especially for shrubs and ground covers. They are attractive and long-lasting. Use the coarser grades for trees and shrubs, the finer grades for flowers and ground covers, Dunham says. Apply a four to six inch layer for long-lasting weed control in shrubs. On flowers, however, use only one to two inches.

garden. Wheat straw is available for many farmers right now.

Pine needles make an attractive mulch, especially for azaleas, rhododendrons, wild flowers, and in naturalistic settings.

Coffee grounds are an excellent mulch for small areas. They have a nice texture and color.

Black plastic is a good mulch for controlling weeds, although it may be hard to apply after plants are already in the ground. Widely used on vegetable gardens, it can be dressed up for the flower garden with a thin cover layer of another attractive mulch.

Newspaper also makes an effective mulch that looks better when covered with a thin layer of another material. First give the soil some extra nitrogen fertilizer. Then spread three to six sheets of newspapers on the ground. Cover with a fancier mulch material for the flower garden, or with a thin layer of soil for the vegetable garden in order to hold it in place.

Another excellent mulch for weed control in vegetables is aluminum foil. It has the added advantage of keeping the soil cool. It also aids plant growth by reflecting light back up under the plants.

Licorice root, sold as Right Dress, is one of the most satisfactory mulches for flower beds.

Cocoa bean hulls are available in some areas. These do tend to pack, so they should not be used more than two inches deep. They are also sometimes toxic to azaleas. However, for many plants they are quite satisfactory and very attractive.

Grass clippings are among the cheapest and most readily available of mulches. The problem with grass clippings, however, is that they tend to rot and pack tightly. This can be overcome by drying the clippings first, or by stirring repeatedly until dry once in place. Grass clippings are probably most at home in the vegetable garden.

Straw is another excellent mulch for the vegetable

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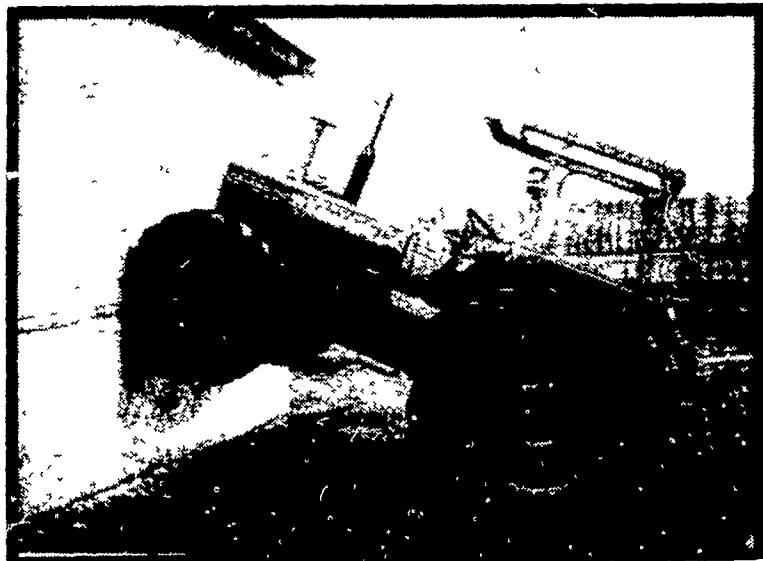
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