



UNIVERSITY of CALIFORNIA

# Agriculture & Natural Resources

COOPERATIVE EXTENSION • YOLO COUNTY

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## Mulching

**Introduction.** Mulches are materials that are placed on top of the soil. Mulches come in many varieties and can be a gardener's best friend. Mulches are often inexpensive and readily available.

**Types.** Inorganic and organic mulches may be used. Mulch structure should be relatively loose to allow free drainage. Rock, plastic mulch, and weed block fabric are the most common types of inorganic "mulch," but do not provide nutrients and may not protect as well against heat or drought. For example, black plastic mulches are used for control of certain pests or diseases but cause overheating of plants if used during the summer. Organic mulches are the most useful in the home garden, and include ground or composted bark, straw or hay, and composted grass clippings or other clean organic waste. Organic mulches can be used throughout the year.

**Benefits.** Organic mulches help to regulate soil temperature and protect roots from extremes in temperature fluctuations. In our climate, organic mulches protect plants from extreme heat and prevent excessive water loss during our hot summers. Mulches, laid thickly enough, will assist in weed control by essentially blocking photosynthesis of weed seedlings. Mulches help to prevent soil erosion. The breakdown of organic mulches provides nutrients to the soil, improves the texture or tilth of soil, and facilitates good drainage. Organic mulches harbor natural enemies (beneficial insects) that may help to prevent insect pests. As mulches may also harbor pests, such as earwigs, snails and slugs, they are not advisable in areas where these pests are present.

**Application.** Mulches should be applied thickly to be effective. Coarse materials, such as fresh straw or hay, or chopped bark, should be applied in a 6 inch layer. Fine materials, such as compost, should be applied in a 3 inch layer. Compost should be applied in the late spring when the soil is beginning to warm. Mulch should not be placed next to trees in order to prevent root and crown diseases that close application of mulch may cause. Frequent application of mulch, preferably yearly or twice yearly if needed, will maintain the benefits. Periodic checking of the soil beneath the mulch to be sure water penetration is adequate is advisable.

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