

Time to Dress Your Garden for Winter



Don't let your garden go naked all winter. Keep it covered, with mulch. Mulch helps your garden in a variety of ways. It's the stuff that adds tilth and nutrients to your soil. Mulch keeps the weeds down in June and the soil moist in August. Now, at the end of the growing season, mulch will help keep the winter cold from damaging the roots of your perennial flowers, small fruits, trees, and shrubs.

Use a minimum of three to six inches of composted material. Tuck mulch up to the shoulders of your perennials, but don't cover the growing crown until freezing cold weather sets in. If you cover plant crowns too soon, they may begin to grow under the mulch and could be killed when temperatures dip.

When possible, it is best to use well-composted mulch material. Shredded bark, leaves, mint hay, wood chips, or yard waste all offer benefits, especially if they have been composted for a year before used in the garden. Fresh wood chips, sawdust or other uncomposted materials will steal available nutrients from your plants so be sure to add fertilizer when using them.

Avoid mulching with hay or straw. Their seeds will sprout to create an unnecessary headache for you in the spring. And don't use grass clippings from a lawn treated with a weed-and-feed preparation. The herbicide in the clippings can damage your shrubs. Evergreen boughs make a good winter mulch in places where cold is severe. Pull mulch off plants in early spring when weather begins to warm to allow new growth to emerge.

A low-nutrient mulch will benefit shrubs such as roses, azaleas, rhododendrons and hydrangeas. Lilies, dahlias and spring bulbs will do better with this type of mulching also. Dormant vegetable beds can use a six-inch blanket of manure and leaves. Rhubarb and asparagus beds do best covered with a mix of well-composted straw and manure. Mulch can also help to discourage the first flush of weeds in early spring.

Bulkier materials like wood chips help to slow the growth of weeds. The finer the mulch material, the easier it is for the weeds to grow in it. Over the winter, the composted material will mix with the soil, so a second application of mulch in March or April will keep your garden soil in better condition.

This article adapted from Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service, USDA. Please contact Ken Churches at cdcalaveras@ucdavis.edu or (209) 754-6475 with your agricultural questions. To speak with a Certified Master Gardener: Calaveras (209) 754-2880, Tuolumne (209) 533-5696, Amador (209) 223-6837, El Dorado (530) 621-5543.