

# Mulch, A Gardener's Best Friend

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By Debra Lemire

Gardeners want a beautiful and eye-catching garden where they can relax, entertain and play. With busy lives, no one has the time to be a slave to anything, including a garden. Fortunately, there are ways to garden smart. The best way to enjoy a low-maintenance garden is to use mulch – a layer of organic or inorganic material placed over a weeded soil surface.

Mulch does more for the garden than any additive or technique out there. Foremost, it conserves soil moisture from evaporation by as much as 50 per cent resulting in less frequent watering.

Furthermore, mulch keeps the soil and nutrients from washing away in rain and high winds. It reduces soil erosion on slopes and prevents soil compaction by cushioning the soil from the rain and allowing air and water to reach the plant roots.

As organic mulch breaks down, it provides valuable nutrients like nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium and trace elements to the soil improving its health and fertility. Worms pull the decomposing mulch or humus into the soil, aerating it and adding their castings which results in a soil that is more friable or easily crumbled mixture.

Not only does mulch look attractive, it acts as a soil insulator. It protects plant roots and beneficial micro-organisms from damaging temperature fluctuations during freeze/thaw cycles in early spring. Mulch also evens or moderates the temperature of the soil during hot periods preventing wild fluctuations which can harm sensitive roots.

In addition, mulch also protects plants from soil-borne diseases and organisms that get splashed onto the leaves from the rain.

Best of all, mulch dramatically reduces the need for weeding, making it a gardener's best friend. Because most weed seeds need sunlight to germinate, using two to three inches of organic mulch stops seeds from sprouting in the soil. Any weeds that do manage to grow are easily removed because the soil beneath the mulch is so moist.

Organic mulches are formerly living material, such as chopped leaves, pine needles, hulls or shells, grass clippings, wood and bark chips, and straw or hay. However, as the mulch decomposes, it needs to be replenished. Inorganic mulches, on the other hand, can be clear or coloured plastic sheeting, rocks, pebbles and landscape fabric or geotextiles.

For the perennial garden, organic mulch is best. Overall, gardeners need to consider attractiveness when choosing mulch; after all, a flower garden is primarily ornamental.