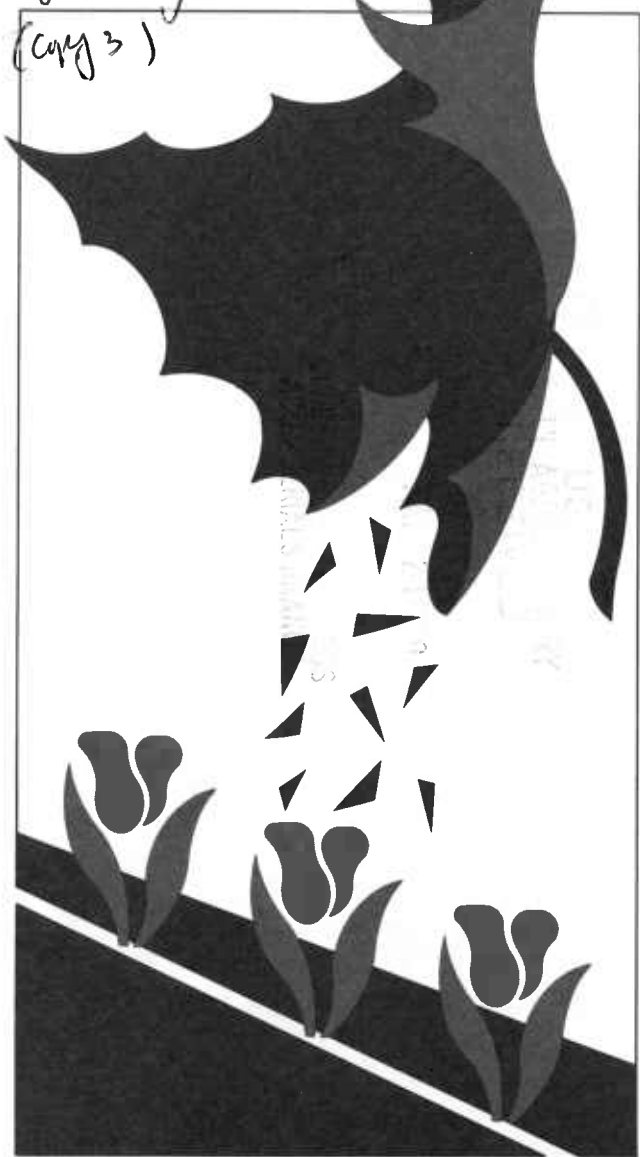


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# Mulches For Your Garden

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## Mulches For Your Garden

By the Soil Conservation Service

Using a mulch in your flower or vegetable garden may well be your most valuable garden practice. A good mulch can reduce soil blowing and washing, suppress weeds, keep the soil moist and cool, and add organic matter to the soil.

Grass clippings, sawdust, straw, and compost make excellent mulches. And they are easy to apply. Simply spread a 3- by 6-inch layer of one of these organic materials on the soil surface around your plants, making certain you do not cover the plants. Keeping the layer deep enough to do the job is important too. This means that you will need to add more mulching material over the old layers to get all the benefits of mulching.

Mulching with grass clippings is a good way to dispose of some of your clippings. But you may need to mix them with other mulch materials to keep them from packing down and preventing water from entering the soil.

Sawdust makes a better mulch if it is well rotted, or if you add 1 to 2 cups of ammonium sulfate or sodium nitrate to each bushel of fresh sawdust before applying the mulch. Weed-free straw is excellent, but loose straw can be a fire hazard, and it may be unsightly to some.



Mulching garden vegetables with straw cuts down on cultivating, weeding, and watering.

WVA-699



Raindrops splashing on bare soil detach soil particles, which are carried away by surface water.

Compost is probably the best mulch you can use. And you can make it yourself from leftover plant materials from your garden. (See centerspread for suggestions on how to make compost.)

Mulches prevent loss of moisture from the soil by evaporation. Moisture moves by capillary action to the surface and evaporates if the soil is not covered by a mulch. Sun and wind hasten this loss of moisture.

You can reduce evaporation and control weeds by stirring the soil an inch or so deep, but plant roots cannot develop in this soil layer. A layer of organic material on the surface gives the same benefits and allows normal plant-root development.

Energy from falling raindrops is dissipated on a mulched soil. The result is less soil erosion and less soil compaction.

Mulches suppress weeds, thus saving you a lot of work. An occasional weed may poke through the mulch, but it is easily pulled out.

Mulches keep the soil from getting hot under intense sunlight. Many plants, including those in vegetable and flower gardens, need a cool surface soil.

Mulches, especially grass clippings and compost, add organic matter to the soil and furnish food for earthworms, which are valuable in aerating the soil. The organic matter helps to keep the soil crumbly and easy to work. Farmers call this good tilth. At the end of the growing season, the mulch can be worked into the soil to supply organic matter the following year.

If you use a mulch around perennials in the winter, remove it in the spring to let the soil thaw out and warm up.

Many organic materials, such as straw and autumn leaves, are rich in carbohydrates and low in nitrogen. Usually, you will find it beneficial to add nitrogen fertilizer to the material before applying it as a mulch. One to two cups of fertilizer high in nitrogen (ammonium sulfate) for each bushel of organic material is about right. To avoid burning the plants, do not let the fertilizer touch them.

To provide a source for one of the best mulches, every gardener should have a compost bin—preferably two—for making compost from organic materials. You can make the bins yourself by attaching ordinary wire fence or boards to solid posts or open brickwork. Each bin should be 4- to 6-feet high, 3- to 5-feet wide, and any convenient length. And one



Two bins permit turning compost by moving it from one bin to the other.

side of each should be removable for convenience in building up the compost material and for taking it out. In late fall, a temporary piece of wire fence may be used to increase the height about 2 feet. After the material settles in March, the piece of fence can be removed.

Compost is not only an excellent mulch, but it is also a good fertilizer and soil conditioner when it is worked into the soil.

Leaves, grass clippings, stems and stalks from harvested vegetables, corn husks, pea hulls, and fine twigs are good materials for composting. You should always compost leaves before using them as a mulch. Raw leaves are flat and may keep water from entering the soil. Avoid using any diseased plants.

The ideal way to make compost is to use two bins. Fill one with alternate layers of organic material 6 to 12 inches thick and of garden soil about 1 inch thick. To each layer of organic material, add chemicals at the following rate:

<i>Chemical</i>	<i>Rate in cups per bushel of organic material <sup>1</sup></i>
<b>Method 1:</b>	
Ammonium sulfate . . . . .	1
or	
Ammonium nitrate . . . . .	½
Ground dolomitic limestone <sup>2</sup> . . . . .	⅔
or	
Wood ashes <sup>2</sup> . . . . .	1½
Superphosphate . . . . .	½
Magnesium sulfate (epsom salts) <sup>3</sup> <sup>4</sup>	1/16
<b>Method 2:</b>	
Mixed fertilizer 5-10-5 . . . . .	3
Ground dolomitic limestone <sup>2</sup> . . . . .	⅔

<sup>1</sup> Packed tightly with your hands.

<sup>2</sup> For acid compost (for azaleas and rhododendrons), omit lime, limestone, and wood ashes.

<sup>3</sup> Add epsom salts only if dolomitic limestone is unavailable and ordinary limestone is used (at same rate).

<sup>4</sup> Equivalent to 1 tablespoonful.

Be sure to moisten the organic material thoroughly. Repeat this layering process until the bin is full or you run out of organic material. Pack the material



*Composting autumn leaves (top) in a circular bin of woven wire fence. City gardeners collect the leaves that gave them summer shade (bottom) and compost them for mulching the soil in next year's garden.*



*Pea hulls and other leftover organic materials can be composted for mulching flowers and vegetables. WVA-805*

tightly around the edges but only lightly in the center so that this area settles more than the edges and the water does not run off.

After 3 to 4 months of moderate to warm weather, commonly in June, begin turning the material by moving it from the first bin into the second one. Before turning, it is a good idea to move the material added the previous fall from the edges, which dry out first, to the center.

In areas that have cool frosty winters, compost made from leaves in November and December can be turned the following May or June.

For additional information, see the local representative of the Soil Conservation Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture.

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