

Fall is a Good Time for Mulching

Daniel E. Mullins*

Thursday, October 31, 2002

Mulches have been described as “silent gardeners” because there are so many benefits. Properly applied and maintained, mulched areas prevent loss of water from the soil by evaporation, suppress weeds, moderate soil temperatures, prevent crusting of the soil surface, improve the soil structure and add beauty to the landscape.

Following are some routine questions that we receive concerning mulches.

Question: What is a mulch?

Answer: A material that is applied to the soil surface for protection and improvement of the area covered.

Question: What can be used for mulch?

Answer: The material may be organic such as bark, wood chips, leaves, pine needles, grass clippings or similar material. Inorganic materials include gravel, pebbles, polyethylene film or woven ground cloth.

Question: What size should the individual particles of mulching material be?

Answer: Organic mulch material is most often recommended, and it should be made up of relatively coarse particles that are larger than one and one-half inches in size. Coarse particles allow more water and oxygen to move into the soil. Mulch made up of fine particles is not recommended because it decomposes more rapidly, can form a hard crust and generally allows more weed infestation.

Question: How deeply should I mulch?

Answer: Coarse textured mulches such as pine needles and pine bark nuggets, which allow good air movement through them, can be maintained at a depth of 3 to 4 inches. Those with finer particles should not be more than 2 to 3 inches deep after settling.

Question: Should I remove the old mulch and apply new every year?

Answer: No, simply add enough new material to maintain the proper depth. Mulched plants will produce roots in the mulch that surrounds them. These roots are produced in addition to the roots that a plant produces in the soil. As a result, mulched plants have more roots than non mulched plants. Removal of the old mulch would damage or destroy these additional roots and weaken the plants.

Question: How large an area should be mulched?

Answer: Mulch entire plant beds with a layer of mulching material. While mulching individual trees in the lawn, create a circular area of mulch that is about 2 feet in diameter for each inch of trunk diameter. Increase the size of the mulched area as the tree grows. Pull mulch 1 to 2 inches away from the stems and trunks of plants. The high moisture environment created by mulch lying against the stem base can cause a crown or stem rot.

Fall is a Good Time for Mulching

Question: Can leaves be used for mulch?

Answer: Yes, leaves make good mulch. However, avoid using leaves of the same size, if possible. Mix leaves from different species of trees or add some pine needles or clippings to alter the texture before applying. Leaves of the same size tend to mat together, creating a shingling effect that sheds water and reduces or impedes Soil gas exchange.

Question of the Week: I would like to overseed my lawn with ryegrass for winter color. What is the best time to do this, and how much seed will I need to apply?

Answer: Annual ryegrass is most often used for this purpose. Seed should be applied during October or early November. Use 10 pounds of seed per 1,000 square feet of area. Plant ryegrass only if you are willing to commit to regular maintenance throughout the winter and early spring. It will require regular watering and mowing, as well as a couple of light fertilizations during the cool season in order to keep it looking well.

**Daniel E. Mullins is Extension Horticulture Agent for the University of Florida IFAS Extension in Santa Rosa County.*

[\[Back\]](#)