



Mulches and Mulching

Mulches are a vital part of the landscape. They hold moisture in the soil, help prevent weed growth, inhibit diseases, and insulate the roots of plants from temperature extremes during summer and winter. Mulch also provides a buffer zone between the turf and woody ornamental plants and helps prevent trunk injury from weed trimmers and lawn mowers. Mulch provides an aesthetic function, adding to the appearance of the landscape. In Georgia and other areas in the south, pine straw is the most common mulch utilized.



The best mulch is organic and include pine straw, pine bark mini-nuggets, hardwood chips and cypress shavings. Fall leaves are an excellent and economical mulch and add valuable humus back to the soil as they decompose. Grass clippings are not a good mulch because they tend to mat down and inhibit the flow of water and nutrients into the soil. They also may contain residual weed control, which may be harmful to the ornamental plantings. Inorganic mulches such as rock, gravel and marble are good soil insulators, but they absorb and re-radiate heat in the landscape, increasing water loss from plants.

Apply mulches 2-3 inches deep in an area extending beyond the canopy of the plant if possible. A small ring of mulch around the trunk provides little benefit to the plant. Having plants in large bed areas with mulch is best. Organic mulches such as pine straw or pine bark break down, decompose over time, and should be replenished once a year.

Avoid placing plastic under mulches; it prevents water, nutrients and oxygen from reaching the roots of the plant. Landscape fabric can be used mulch. It allows water, nutrients and oxygen to reach the roots. However, roots can become entangled in the fabric, making it hard to add or change the landscape over time.

Mulch	Advantages	Disadvantages
Pine Straw	Excellent mulch for water conservation	Fades and decomposes quickly with age. Requires annual topdressing with additional straw to maintain appearance and effectiveness
Pine Bark	Smaller nuggets conserve moisture better than larger sizes. Longer lasting than pine straw	Larger nuggets sometime wash away in heavy rains
Shredded Bark	Durable and long lasting	none
Cedar Mulch	Long lasting, stays in place with good color retention	none
Color enhanced mulches	Long lasting with good moisture retention	Doesn't look natural
Gravel Marble Chips Volcanic Rock	Long lasting	Absorbs and radiates heat. Unnatural in appearance in many landscapes
Rubber mulch	Long lasting	Doesn't look natural, flammable and adds no organic matter to the soil
Cocoa-bean hulls	Long lasting dark brown color	Expensive, toxic to dogs
Wood Chips	Long lasting, usually readily available	
Weed Barrier Fabrics	Reduces weeds and allows air and water penetration	Need to be covered with mulch, which when it decomposed allows for weed to develop on top of fabric. Roots from trees and shrubs can become entangled
Composted materials such as mushrooms	Good organic mulch adding much value to the soil	Breaks down quickly
Nut shells; pecan, hazelnut	Nice appearance	Hard to walk on