

Mulching Matters

What is mulch? It is simply a layer of material, commonly organic, covering the soil surface to exclude sunlight. Organic materials frequently used as mulch include wood chips, leaves, grass clippings, straw, and compost.

The practice of mulching produces a variety of wonderful benefits— spread over the soil surface, mulches help to suppress weeds; control erosion; modify soil temperature, keeping plant roots cool in the summer and warm in the winter; reduce soil compaction and water lost to run-off and evaporation; and keep fruit off the soil so it is less likely to bruise and rot. The soil environment beneath the mulch is favorable for earthworms, which are valuable for aerating the soil. Organic matter is gradually added to the soil as the mulch decomposes. A two to four-inch layer of mulch solves the problem of muddy garden paths, too.

Mulch can be applied year round. Remove any weeds prior to application. Then spread mulch two to four inches thick around pathways, play areas, and around the base of trees, shrubs, flower beds and vegetable gardens. Materials will settle as they decompose so add fresh mulch periodically to maintain the appropriate thickness. Keep mulch two to four inches away from trunks of trees and shrubs.

Recycling your yard and garden waste is a free and easy alternative to purchasing commercial mulch. Collect your grass and leaves, or other organic material for use as mulch. For best appearance, materials for mulch should be one to two inches long and not more than an inch thick. Let fresh grass clippings dry out prior to using them as mulch. Avoid using any materials sprayed with pesticides, especially if mulching with them around food plants.

Mulch lawns by “grasscycling,” simply leaving the mowed clippings on the lawn rather than bagging them. If you grasscycle, mow at least twice a week at slightly less than the recommended height (see Table 1.). The basic grasscycling rule is mow often enough so that one-third or less of the growth is removed each time. Contrary to popular belief, grasscycling does not lead to excessive thatch build-up in your lawn.

The UCCE Sonoma County Master Gardeners promote recycling of yard and garden debris through mulching and composting. With minimal work and time, you can convert your raw and very valuable yard resources to a product that works for you!

With searing temperatures and limited water resources, mulching matters!

Composting's Cool

Compost fresh grass clippings, leaves, shrub and tree trimmings, and other “green waste” from your garden and yard for soil amendments. Composts enhance the health and productivity of your garden and yard as well as divert a large amount of bulky materials from ever-diminishing landfills. Compost is soft, dark, and crumbly, and results from decomposition of organic materials like garden and yard green waste. Compost is beneficial when worked into the soil to increase drainage, and water and nutrient-holding capacity. It also supplies a small amount of nutrients for your plants.

In order for garden and yard green waste to decay quickly and completely into compost, it must be 1) in a large enough pile to allow the center to warm sufficiently for the decay process to occur; and 2) kept moist and well aerated. Some type of structure is usually needed to keep the pile neat, in place, and in the right shape. Several commercially available models are on the market or you can make a simple one yourself. For example a 10' x 4' piece of fencing works wonderfully as a circular container. It is easy to remove to turn the pile and allows for excellent aeration. Multiple containers allow you to have several piles in various states of decomposition, ensuring a year-round supply of compost. Put the pile in a place that is out of the way but near a source of water. Alternate layers of green and dried, or brown, materials, watering each lightly as you place them in the pile. The time required for composted materials to be ready for use is mostly dependent on how often the pile is turned; generally, the more often the pile is turned, the faster the material will decompose. If turned every two days, the pile will be ready in about three weeks. If never turned, the pile will take about a year to decompose.

Other factors also affect how fast the pile will decompose. Try to have an equal amount of green material (fresh grass, green prunings, fresh vegetables and fruits) and dried material (dead leaves, dried grass, and woody prunings) in the pile. Keep the pile evenly moist; too much water slows decomposition and encourages strong odors. Too little water slows or prevents decomposition. The heat supplied by microorganisms decomposing the materials is critical for rapid composting. To build up the amount of necessary heat (160o F) and to prevent heat loss the pile should be at least 3' x 3' x 3'. A plastic cover on top of the pile helps to retain heat (keep the sides of the pile open, though, for aeration).

For detailed information on composting, please pick up the Sonoma Master Gardeners pamphlet on *More Hints for Composting* or contact the Master Gardener Information Desk at (707) 565-2608.