

## MULCH IN MY GARDEN & WHAT ABOUT COMPOST?

**This article contains information about mulch and compost in home landscapes. You will find an explanation of mulch, Parker County Master Gardeners' preferences and experiences and then pictures of some of the favorite mulch available.**

Mulches can either be organic or inorganic. Organic mulches, like pine bark, break down over time. Inorganic mulches, like gravel, will not break down. Mulch is aesthetically pleasing because it looks clean and neat. This gives your garden a "finished" landscaping look and improves curb appeal. However, the benefits of mulch don't stop there. Mulch also helps to retain moisture, prevent soil erosion, control weeds and it adds nutrients to the soil. When it comes to choosing which type of mulch to use, you will find many different options. Here's a brief look at different types and advantages and disadvantages of each.

**Cedar mulch** is insect resistant, suppresses weeds and prevents weed germination when applied deep enough. Natural light color reduces air temperature and water loss from around plants, Light in weight which makes installation easy and breaks down to add nutrients to the soil.

**Cypress mulch** is insect resistant suppresses weeds and prevents weed germination when applied deep enough. Natural light color reduces air temperature and water loss from around plants. Light in weight which makes installation easy and breaks down to add nutrients to the soil.

**Wood chips** are the most common type of mulch you will find at a garden center. They are easy to work with, plus it provides all the advantages listed above of good mulch. The only disadvantage that can be found is with new, unseasoned wood chips. They tend to give off toxins and acids that can damage new plants. As well, there is a possibility of developing a fungal contamination. It is best to stick with wood chips that have been aged for at least a year.

**Leaves** can also work. Leaves are organic and will break down, providing nutrients to the soil. Leaves can be raked from your yard and used as inexpensive mulch. This mulch type quickly decomposes and will eventually turn into compost. The disadvantage of leaves is that if they haven't started to decompose, then they can easily blow away or become matted when it rains. Before using leaves, let them dry out completely and then crush or crumple them before use.

**Straw** comes from the leftover stems of harvested grain crops. The main advantage of straw is that it makes a good groundcover for vegetable gardens and unplanted patches of garden. However, straw has a few disadvantages. Since it is so light, straw tends to blow away easily. It will quickly decompose and needs to be replaced often

**Newspaper or shredded paper** works great in vegetable gardens. The advantages are that newspaper is easy to find and it will decompose very quickly. The disadvantages are that you may not find it attractive for landscaping (you can add your favorite mulch over the top of the paper) and the colored ink on the paper may actually harm plants. If you go for this cost efficient option, just make sure not to use sections such as the comics, any magazines or the glossy pages.

**Pine bark and pine needles/straw** are both organic mulches that can come in many forms for use around plants. There are pine bark nuggets, ground pine bark, large pine bark strips and pine straw. They have several advantages: they look good in most landscaping designs, they retain moisture and they will stay in place even during a hard rain. The disadvantages are they tend to increase the level of acidity in the soil. However, some plants do love a more acidic soil, so pine needles work great with these plants. Much of Parker County soil can use acidic additions. You can tell what your soil needs by having a soil test on your garden. Call the Extension Office for kits and information.

**Peat moss** is a soil amendment made from partially decomposed sphagnum moss. It is absorbent like a sponge, and although it does not contain nutrients, it holds nutrients present in the soil until plants need them. It is the only soil amendment that helps soil achieve the proper balance of air and water, and also helps loosen dense soil and add density to sandy soil. Peat moss has many uses in gardening and in lawn care. Add peat moss to the soil of a garden to condition the soil before planting. Peat moss is ideal for improving the texture of the soil, and when added to garden soil it will stop nutrient runoff from occurring by holding water and nutrients in. Dig 1 inch of peat moss into 6 inches of soil by hand, being careful not to damage plant roots. Disadvantage is that when it completely dries out, it is sometimes difficult to moisten to the point you might want.

**Pebbles and gravel** are inorganic material and will not break down over time in the garden. They provide no nutritional additions to the soil; however they may often look neater than other mulches. Stones also provide a decent weed barrier, especially if they are placed over black plastic.

**Coco bean hulls** have a good appearance and good insulation (absorbs heat from the sun). Cost can be high in most areas. Usually an inch thickness is best and weed control is good. If not allowed to mat, the water penetration and retention is good. Slow to decompose but will add nitrogen to soil. Sawdust can be added to improve texture and increase water retention. May develop mold and has a chocolatey smell....some like this and some do not. **CAUTION**-if you have dogs be aware they may be drawn to this mulch and it can be toxic if they eat it.

**Pecan hulls** mulch is a favorite of some but the sharp edges make it difficult to work a bed. Varmints often are drawn to the bed. If fresh, may leach nitrogen from the soil. Has an attractive look and is slow to decompose some feel this is a good thing and others do not.

**Rubber mulch** is on the market and now used sometimes in public playgrounds. Advantages are great way to recycle tires but may be considered unusual in home landscapes. Doesn't float away, blow away, decay, sink into the ground, feed or house insects, smell, mat, melt or mold. Impedes weed growth, conditions garden soil, water and nutrients permeate. Safe for flowers, plants and pets. Earth tones and designer colors, special fade resistant coating. Disadvantages are they contain heat and may not look very good a home landscape.

**Ground coffee or whole coffee beans** can be picked up at local coffeehouses (they usually save their used grounds for this purpose). While it will give the garden a rich coffee smell, it also is organic and adds nutrients to the soil. It's not a very long lasting mulch, but a nice-looking one.

**Landscape fabric** can be purchased from garden centers in rolls and may be called geotextile. It has several advantages; including providing excellent weed control, while still allowing air and moisture to pass through it to the soil below. The main disadvantage of landscape fabric is that the roots of plants above it can penetrate the fabric, making them hard to remove. This fabric works great in large areas and can even be used under permanent structures such as patios and decks.

**Black plastic mulch** appearance is poor, unless you cover it with your favorite mulch. Black plastic mulch keeps the moisture already in the soil from escaping, but also heats up the ground considerably. Insulating value in winter is fair. Can be left in place but nourishment and aeration afforded to underlying soil by decomposition is non-existent. Does not let water and oxygen move freely into soil. Application and maintenance is easy. Can be used effectually as a weed block.

---

**That is a short description of some types of mulch available. The following is from a survey of Parker County Master Gardeners. It is offered for your information and**

**gives you comments, opinions and recommendations in their own words of their experiences with mulch and compost in their landscapes.**

**Master Gardener:**

My favorite way to use mulch is with wet newspaper under it. Works well, lasts a long time, and I've noticed when the paper breaks down, the soil is wonderful. Usually I use cypress, cedar or hardwood over it, always natural, not colored. I've heard some of the chemicals aren't the greatest for the soil or pets - not sure how accurate that is. I would love the cocoa hulls, but I understand that animals are drawn to them and it's very detrimental to them. Plus I like mulch that doesn't hurt (as pecan shells would as well). I've used peat moss, but mainly in my blueberry beds (acidic) or when I need moisture retention. I hate gravel and rock - weeds and grass always grow through them and then it's a real pain to do anything. I recently finished removing gravel from the bed in my new house and it was a nightmare. You couldn't plant and it was hard to remove because the weeds and grass had grown through the landscape fabric and in and out of all the rocks and the roots were horribly entwined with everything. Mom had lava rock and even though it's been maintained, it's a pain there, also. Tears up the fingers and nails maintaining. I'd rather just dump on new (soft!) mulch and know the old nourishes the soil. I do compost and use it to add nutrients to the soil. If I have enough, I'll also add to the mulch or put under it. I've seen what compost can do and am a big believer.

---

**Master Gardener:**

My favorite mulch is pine bark nuggets. I like it because it easily breaks down and will add acidity to my soil, I think, or maybe it's just in my head. I don't use it as my husband puts down the mulch, and he says it doesn't last long enough, and we have to replace it more often. Pine bark nuggets float which is my only negative thought on pine bark nuggets. We put down cedar mulch. We use natural mulch.

We have used newspaper covered with mulch in areas where we have sucker problems....wax myrtle trees. After the newspaper breaks down, however, the suckers return.

---

**Master Gardener:**

Uses newspaper under mulch also uses newspaper under landscape cloth then covered with favorite mulch.

---

**Master Gardener:**

Pine bark is my favorite because it looks the best. Only natural. I like mulch from native stuff also. Newspaper works as well as anything but you have to use a thick enough layer.

Rocks are great in some instances

---

**Master Gardener:**

I use shredded native trees as mulch.

---

**Master Gardener:**

I use cypress in the back yard bed. (We have a drainage issue and have to have something that doesn't float.)

---

**Master Gardener:**

I prefer natural colored cedar mulch. I love the smell but it also helped my problem with snails, slugs and pillbugs. I have a walk in cedar closet and felt that principle would also work outside to deter insects. We just finished two new beds (one large and one small). We dug out the grass, put down newspapers, soil; scattered moth balls over then added the cedar mulch. We have problems with a cat that belongs to a neighbor and have success with the moth balls and cedar mulch to keep it from using our yard as its own bathroom.

---

**Master Gardener:**

I have used colored mulch only in my front yard and thinking of changing that.

---

**Master Gardener:** (responses from one Master Gardener to survey)

**Cedar-** GOOD FOR PACKING TIGHT ON SLOPES

**Coco bean hulls** – NOT FOR DOGS!

**Composted leaves, grass** - CHEAP

**Cypress-** WOULDN'T RECOMMEND

**Peat moss** – ONLY FOR TOP DRESSING FOR FUNGUS ON LAWNS HERE

**Pecan hulls** WORKS GREAT – DETERS CATS AND EASY TO PULL WEEDS THRU

**Pine bark** - GREAT

**Pine bark nuggets** – BAD – FLOAT AWAY WITH GULLYWASHERS

**Pine needles-** HARD TO GET HERE BUT DETERS ALL THINGS TO GROW IN IT. BUILDS UP ON SOIL. USED LOTS IN SOUTH

**Straw** – ONLY FOR VEG BED PATHS AND AROUND PLANTS

Use-NATIVE DOUBLE GRIND MULCH & PINE BARK

**Black plastic** covered with favorite mulch –NOT DURABLE ENOUGH, TEARS EASILY WHEN WEEDING TOP ROOTING WEEDS

**Landscape cloth** covered with favorite mulch – GREAT FOR NO WORK BEDS AND SHRUBS, WEEDS THAT BLOW IN PULL EASILY, DOES NOT ADD ANY NUTRITION TO SOIL.

**Newspaper** covered with favorite mulch – WORKS GREAT

**Gravel** – ONLY FOR CACTUS

**Rocks** – GREAT FOR CACTUS

**Do you compost?** YES. Use it: as amendment to add nutrients to the soil

---

**Master Gardener:**

I like natural pine bark nuggets over fabric. Plastic does not allow water to get to the roots as the plants grow. Trees are probably the worst hit as the roots are fed at the drip line. It also causes gully washes at the sides of the garden where the water ends up.

I do not use black plastic or landscape cloth under mulch because weeds can come through these and it is a mess to work.

---

**Master Gardener:**

I use composted leaves, grass (I use lawn mower shredded leaves extensively) I like pine bark (I use this as finely ground as I can find it). I use newspaper covered with favorite mulch (Have used this when have a big weed or grass problem).

---

**Master Gardener:** I like cedar mulch, for the aroma and the appearance. In a brand new bed, after digging out grass and before adding new bedding soil I like to use a layer of newspaper, 10 to 12 sheets thick, then the new soil and then the mulch after the plants have been placed.

---

**More Master Gardener Responses:** These are additional responses to the survey.

---

**Cedar** used by a large number of members.

**Composted leaves/grass** used by members and some leave the fallen leaves in the beds (unless they are from shrubs that carry fungal diseases and then they remove them).

**Cypress** used by several members.

**Hardwood mulch** used by several members but many prefer the double grind.

**Peat moss** used by one member for her blueberry patch and others mix it in with mulch or compost.

**Pecan hulls** are used but mostly in beds that do not require a great deal of work because of the sharp edges.

**Pine bark** used by some members.

**Pine bark nuggets** used by some members.

**Straw** used by a few members.

Most of the members use the uncolored (natural colored) mulch but one uses a colored mulch that matches her landscape.

**Black plastic covered with favorite mulch** is used by a few in special places.

**Landscape cloth covered with favorite mulch** used in vegetable gardens and new beds.

**Newspaper covered with favorite mulch** used in vegetable gardens and new beds by several members.

**Gravel** is used by members in cactus and succulent beds and for driveways.

**Rocks** are used by some members in cactus and succulent beds and for accent in others.

---

**Many members compost.** Some a great deal and others some. A few do not compost because of where they live they do not have an area to dedicate to composting.

Those who compost use the finished product to add nutrients to the soil, add it to their vegetable garden for nutrition, mix it in the soil when planting or add it to their favorite mulch.

---

**Master Gardener:** (composting difficulties)

I try to but the horses get into it and spread it around. (Even Master Gardeners have problems.)

---

**Master Gardener:**

I use compost to work into beds to improve soil (as do several Master Gardeners).

---

**Master Gardener:**

I use composted leaves/grass - sometimes I just leave the leaves in some beds to compost. To use pecan hulls - I put pecan hulls in my compost pile.

---

**Master Gardener:**

Do you compost? Yes, I keep several compost piles. I live in the country so I put the farm animal manure along with hay, leaves and kitchen scraps into it.

---

**Master Gardener:**

Do you compost? Yes, it is added as a supplement to citrus containers.

---

**Master Gardener:**

Do you compost? Yes. If so, how do you use it: every fall I mow what I can then I rotate any mulch still left from the previous season into one pile and start two more. I just leave the piles and occasionally either run over the outer edges with the lawnmower or chew the centers with the weedeater. All vegetable matter from the kitchen goes in the mix along with 1 lb. of nitro. Don't put onion in because dogs being dogs will eat anything rotten and onions are toxins to them. To add nutrients to the soil I only use 33-0-0 low rate fertilizer. My yard is never lacking in the others.

---

**Master Gardener:**

Do you compost? No – only because of my eye surgery but I had a turbo composter.

---


**Master Gardener:**

Do you compost? I just leave compost to create dirt in a low drop-off where I have pure rock.

---

**Master Gardener:**

Do you compost? I use all my grass yard clippings to stop erosion. Place clippings in a way to catch soil when runoff occurs. Maiden grass, etc. works very well-place across runoff area.

Example: runoff area -----slope  (add grass, clippings to the slope down area)  
down

---



**Cypress mulch**



**Double shredded hardwood mulch**



**Pecan hull mulch**



**Pine bark mulch**



**Large brown river rocks**



**Pea Gravel**



**Coco bean hulls mulch**



**Tan rubber mulch**



**Peat Moss**



**Wood chip mulch**



**Cedar mulch**