

Garden practice Mulching

A layer of mulch can often help with weed control, retention of soil moisture, reduction of soil compaction and frost protection

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Which mulch to use?

Different mulching materials offer practical solutions depending on whether they are biodegradable or permanent, and whether spread in autumn or spring.

1 Composted organic matter

Material: Home compost (left), well-rotted manure, leafmould, mushroom compost and green waste are readily available; composted bracken, or seaweed, are also suitable.
Use: Spread a 5–8cm (2–3in) deep layer as a weed suppressant and help retain soil moisture in summer. It can help to prevent surface compaction, and boosts soil fertility as it breaks down. A thick layer on crowns of borderline-hardy herbaceous plants left to overwinter will protect against hard frosts, but avoid sticky and wet material as this may cause rot.
Apply: In autumn for frost protection; in spring onto warm, moist soil for weed suppression and moisture retention.

2 Straw

Material: Stalks of cereals such as wheat or barley. Small quantities can be sourced from pet suppliers but if obtained from a farmer or agricultural merchant check it is free of herbicide residues.
Use: Ideal for all purposes but its appearance is more suitable for less-ornamental areas such as a vegetable garden or at the back of a border. A thick, dry, secure layer can help to insulate the crowns of borderline-hardy herbaceous plants such as dahlias or agapanthus overwintering in borders.
Apply: In autumn for frost protection; in spring onto moist, weed-free soil for weed suppression and moisture retention.

3 Gravel and shingle

Material: Fragments of rock of varied origin and size, slightly rounded in form.
Use: Gravel or shingle makes an attractive mulch to cover the soil where drought-tolerant plants are grown and planting is less dense. A layer 5–8cm (2–3in) deep will reduce the evaporation of vital rainwater from the soil surface. It will also act as a weed suppressant in areas of otherwise bare soil, especially if spread onto a weed-suppressing membrane. Coarser gravel suits larger plants, finer gravel suits smaller plants and allows for self-seeding.
Apply: In autumn or spring to prevent weed seedling growth.



4 Stone chippings

Material: Crushed aggregate, available in a variety of colours and sizes.
Use: Often used in alpine troughs and rock gardens to suppress weed seedlings and as an ornamental topdressing. During heavy rainfall, grit can also prevent muddy water splashing up onto the plant foliage, which can lead to localised dieback. Ideally choose a grit that is of the same origin as the larger rock fragments on the rockery or within the alpine trough for a natural finish.
Apply: In autumn to reduce soil splash; in spring to suppress weeds, especially after planting.

5 Wood or bark chips

Material: Fresh wood chippings are often a by-product of tree surgery; woody prunings from a domestic shredder are also suitable.
Use: As a weed suppressant and to retain moisture around the base of trees and shrubs. Fresh wood chippings can draw nitrogen from the soil as they decompose, but when used as a mulch the effect on plants is minimal; further decay will release low levels of nutrients into the soil. RHS research has shown that suggested links between wood-chip mulches and honey fungus infection are insignificant.
Apply: In autumn or spring to moist, weed-free soil.

6 Mulching mats

Material: A preformed mat of coir or similar fibrous material that decomposes over months; cover with a 'topping' of your choice.
Use: As a quick method of creating a mulching layer around a single-stemmed tree or large shrub immediately after planting, primarily to suppress weed growth and retain soil moisture in the first year of establishment. The soil needs to be fine and level so that the mat sits snugly on the soil surface in order to suppress weed growth. Lightweight mats may need to be weighted down to be effective.
Apply: In autumn or spring after planting or around established plants to suppress weeds.

Using mulches

Mulching materials used in RHS Gardens

RHS Gardens Hyde Hall and Rosemoor both use a range of mulching materials depending on the site and style of planting.

❖ **Ian le Gros, Curator RHS Garden Hyde Hall**, says,

'We had been using composted pine bark in the Australian Garden but it retained more moisture than expected and, coupled with poor drainage and the recent cold winters, we lost a lot of plants. We will be using more Leca (expanded clay granules) in this area' (inset).

Other mulches used:

- ❖ 20–30mm flint gravel in the Dry Garden;
- ❖ a mix of green-waste compost and bark on ornamental borders.

❖ **Jonathan Webster, Curator RHS Garden Rosemoor**, says,

'We don't use mulches in the autumn for frost protection as the soil here is heavy and moisture retentive, and a mulch might cause slightly tender plants to rot. However, a range of mulches are used in spring especially a mix of wood chips and horse manure with straw chopped up evenly and spread on the Rose Gardens.' Other mulches used in spring:

- ❖ a fine composted bark around bedding and other seasonal displays;
- ❖ gravel in the Mediterranean Garden;
- ❖ wood chips from a local sawmill in the Arboretum.

www.rhs.org.uk For more on mulching materials and techniques, enter 'Mulch' in the search box on RHS Online.
❖ See *The Plantsman*, Dec 2005, pp204–207 (PDF available online via search above) for the RHS Garden Wisley assessment of the risk of honey fungus infection from timber-derived mulches.

