

Choose, prepare mulch carefully

Nature is a good teacher as we maintain our gardens. As leaves fall in the forest, they drift down slowly and intermingle with branches and twigs. This helps to keep them from matting.

By the same token, the mulch you choose for your garden plants, trees and shrubs shouldn't be allowed to mat. If using leaves, it is best to shred them before applying as mulch. Pine needles, bark, wood chips, straw and newspaper (ink is no problem) also make good mulches.

Care should be taken not to apply a winter mulch before the ground has frozen. For instance, if a mulch is applied too soon over newly planted bulbs, little critters may find it is an ideal spot to nest and the carefully placed bulbs may be a feast for them as well.

Rhododendrons and other shallow rooted plants should be mulched all during the year. Apply the mulch so that it reaches the lowest leaves on the plants. By springtime it should

have been reduced to about half this amount. The excess of about two inches can be removed after the danger of freezing has passed.

A general rule for the depth of mulches is shredded leaves 2-3 inches, pine needles 4-5 inches, bark 1-2 inches, wood chips 3-5 inches, straw 5-6 inches and newspapers 1/2-1 inch. Synthetic materials are excellent for weed control, but may inhibit aeration around the plant roots. Synthetic materials also don't have a great buffering effect on soil temperature.

Plastic can be laid on a bed that has contained annual flowers after you have cleaned it up for the winter. Punch holes in the plastic and anchor it well. The holes will enable water to penetrate the soil and the plastic will kill the weeds before they have a chance to grow in the spring.

Most organic mulches should be dug into the soil every year or two and a new layer added. As winter begins, spade the mulch under and replace it just before weed growth



down to earth

Marty Figley

starts in the spring if you have not applied it in the fall.

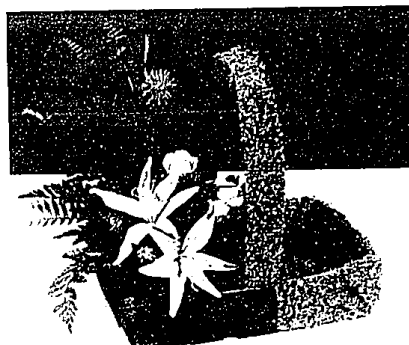
A special tip to strawberry growers - wait until the temperatures are in the 20s, when the plants have stopped growing, before applying a mulch. Mulching before then will smother the plants.

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