

# Mulching mistakes to avoid



**L**andscape features vary significantly from house to house. Some homeowners may prefer water features on their properties, while others focus on flowers that would be the envy of a botanical garden. Regardless of those preferences, lawn and garden enthusiasts who want to make their properties as idyllic as possible may eventually look to mulch to help them accomplish that goal. Mulch helps soil retain moisture, which promotes strong, healthy flowers, plants, trees, and shrubs. And because soil beneath mulch retains more moisture than soil that's not protected by mulch, homeowners won't have to spend as much time watering mulched landscapes. That saves time and conserves water, which can be a big benefit in areas prone to drought and/or especially hot summers. Mulch also helps to suppress weed growth, which can ensure all that hard work needed to create an eye-catching garden won't be compromised by the presence of unsightly, thirsty weeds. Mulching seems like a simple task, and it can be. But that does not mean homeowners cannot make mistakes when mulching. The following are some common mulching mistakes to avoid as lawn and garden season hits full swing.

**Not enough mulch:** Mulch is ineffective when spread too thin. The Virginia Cooperative Extension at

Virginia Tech and Virginia State University recommends applying mulch no less than two inches in depth. Anything less than that will prove ineffective at preventing weed growth and helping the soil retain moisture, and that means you will need to water more often.

**Poorly located mulch:** Mulch should not be placed too close to plant stems or tree trunks. When it is, tissue is so wet that it makes for a perfect environment for disease and insect infestation.

**Failing to mulch to the drip line:** The drip line of a tree refers to the outermost circumference of the tree's canopy from which water drips onto the ground. The VCE recommends mulching to the drip line of a plant or tree, which ensures the plant or tree will get the most out of the mulch. Mulching to the drip line also minimizes competition from the grass, leading to stronger plants and trees.

**Failing to weed before mulching:** Weeds should be removed prior to mulching. If they're not, the mulch can provide the same growing environment for weeds that you're trying to create for your plants and trees. Mulching benefits a landscape in myriad ways, especially when homeowners avoid some common mulching mistakes.

# Difference between Organic & inorganic mulches

**T**he benefits of mulch are widely known among lawn and garden enthusiasts. By insulating soil from extreme temperatures, helping soil to retain moisture and preventing weed growth, mulch can help plants, trees and gardens thrive, even during periods when Mother Nature can make that very difficult. Novice gardeners may find themselves a little confused when visiting a lawn and garden center

to purchase mulch. That's because there are various types of mulches. One of the ways to simplify that is to break mulches down into two main classes: organic and inorganic. Learning to distinguish between these two classes can help homeowners choose the best mulch for their properties.

## Organic mulch

Organic mulches are made up of materials that decompose over time. The experts at BobVila.com note that, because they decompose over time, organic mulches must be replenished on a regular basis. Hardwood and softwood chips are among the most popular and recognizable organic mulches. Evergreen needles, leaves, grass clippings, and compost mixes also fall under the organic mulch umbrella. Many gardening enthusiasts prefer organic mulches because they help soil retain moisture, improve soil fertility and help to deter weed growth.

## Inorganic mulches

Inorganic mulches are permanent because they do not decompose over time. Gravel, brick chips and crushed stone are examples of inorganic mulches. Homeowners who do not intend to plant after laying mulch may lean toward inorganic mulches, as they won't require much work, if any, after being laid. However, the Chicago Botanic Garden notes that inorganic mulches do not improve soil quality. In fact, because inorganic mulches like rocks and stones absorb heat, they can be detrimental to plants in areas where weather tends to be very dry and hot. The right mulch for a given property depends on a host of factors. Understanding the differences between organic and inorganic mulches is a great first step toward finding the right mulch for your landscape.

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