Friday’s Feature
By
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Don’t let your leaves leave home

Your plants need a warm bed just as much as you do with winter approaching, but you shouldn't have to break the bank to get the job done right. Homemade mulch lets you cut costs without sacrificing your landscape and garden.

According to Andrea Gonzalez with the University of Georgia College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences, using fall leaves, compost and recycled woodchips can cut down on spending while still allowing you to have the best looking yard in the neighborhood.

Done properly mulching is one of the best things you can do to help plants get established and survive our environmental extremes.

Perennials, bulbs and trees planted in the fall will spend the late fall and winter developing healthy roots that will help them support the stress of blooming in the spring.

While the tops of landscape plants go dormant for the winter, roots don’t have such luxury. They continue to grow all winter. Active growth means the roots can’t acclimate to cold and can easily be damaged if not provided extra insulation.

This is where mulching comes into play. Mulches keep roots evenly moist and cut down on the frequency of watering while insulating roots from extreme heat and cold. They also prevent weeds that compete with plants for moisture and nutrients, and they serve as a barrier to certain soil-borne diseases.

One of the best winter antifreezes for the landscape is fall leaves. Two to three inches of leaves placed over the soil will keep plant roots toasty warm this winter. Plus, leaves not only provide insulation, they also add valuable organic material to the soil as they decompose.

The key to success when using leaves as mulch is to reduce their size by shredding them with a lawn mower. Shredded leaves don’t blow around like whole leaves. Use shredded leaves as mulch under trees, shrubs, vegetables, annuals and perennials.
Compost decomposed from leaves and grass clippings can also be used as mulch and is relatively easy to make. Any leaves work as long as the resulting mulch is fine in texture so that it does not mat down and prevent water and air from reaching the roots. Pecan and walnut tree leaves, however, are not recommended since they produce a toxic chemical, known as juglone that inhibits root growth.

If you don’t like the look of homemade mulches, use them as a 2- to 3-inch base, and then place more attractive mulch like pine straw or bark mulch on top.

As you place mulch around your trees and shrubs, take care to pull it slightly away from stems and trunks because it may encourage stem-rotting diseases.

If you need more mulch than you can make, check with your local government. Some municipalities grind curbside waste and provide compost and woodchips to citizens. Some also turn Christmas trees into fragrant mulch after the holidays are over.

The time it takes to mulch plantings is far outweighed by the time saved on watering and weeding. So recycle what you have, and take advantage of what is available for free, locally. Don’t let your leaves leave home.

Theresa Friday is the Environmental Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.

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