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Friday's Feature
By
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Dress up your garden beds with mulch

If you are anxious to do something in the landscape, think about replenishing the mulch in your garden beds. Mulching is one of the simplest and most beneficial practices you can use in the garden.

Mulch is defined as any material used on the soil surface. Mulch improves the aesthetics of the garden bed, moderates soil temperatures, helps to reduce annual weeds and can prevent run off and erosion.

Organic versus inorganic
Mulch is generally broken into two categories, organic and inorganic. Organic mulches are those that used to be living materials. Examples include pine bark, leaves, pine needles and yard trash. Organic mulches decompose over time adding nutrients to the soil. Inorganic mulches like gravel, stone and recycled tires are more permanent than organic mulch. Inorganic mulches do not break down and improve soil structure nor add nutrients to the soil. If a site requires renovation, inorganic mulches can be difficult to remove, whereas organic mulches can be easily incorporated into the soil.

Left:
Inorganic, rubber mulch is frequently used on playgrounds.

Right:
Recycled glass is being used as mulch.

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Choosing a mulch

The ideal mulch does not compact readily. It does not hinder water and air movement into the soil, it is not a fire hazard, and it breaks down slowly. In addition, the ideal mulch is uniform in color, weed-free, attractive and does not blow away.

With such a wide variety of mulches available in the marketplace, how do choose one? There are many things to consider when choosing mulch. How does it look? How long will it last? What is its flammability?

If appearance is your main concern, inorganic mulches may be the best choice. If the main objective is soil improvement, consider an organic mulch that gradually breaks down. If the area is used primarily for annual flowers, it often is more practical to use a temporary organic mulch, such as composted leaves or grass clippings that can be turned under each fall.

Flammability, or how quickly a mulch will burn, is also something to consider when mulch is used next to a structure. A University of Arizona research study indicates that the organic mulches with the greatest amount of air space between the particles had the greatest ability to ignite and burn. Inorganic mulches such as gravel or rocks offer superior fire-proofing. However, any windblown debris that has collected on the rocks should be regularly removed as to prevent small debris fires from igniting structures.

For more information on the different types of mulches, read the University of Florida publication "Mulches for the Landscape." It's available online at http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/mg251 or by calling your local Extension office.

How much mulch

For well-drained sites, apply a two to three inch layer (after settling) of mulch around trees, shrubs and bedding plants. If there are drainage problems, use a thinner layer. Coarse materials, such as pine bark nuggets, may be applied to a depth of four inches, but don't allow mulch to accumulate to a greater depth.

"Volcano mulching," or mulch applied too deeply, is an all too familiar practice. It is not recommended and can be harmful because it hinders oxygen exchange to roots, which stresses the plant and causes root rot. Do not place mulch on top of a tree's root ball or against the trunk.

To calculate the amount of mulch you need, first measure the area to be mulched, in square feet. Next convert the desired depth to a fraction of a foot. For example, 3 inches divided by 12 inches equals ¼ foot or 0.25 foot. Multiply this fraction by the square-foot measurement of the area to be covered (.25 foot x 100 square feet = 25 cubic feet). Since most bagged mulch is available in volumes of about 2 cubic feet, divide the

needed amount by two. In this example, you need at least 13 bags of mulch. If buying bulk mulch, convert cubic feet to cubic yards by dividing cubic feet by 27 (25/27 = .926). To cover a 100-square-foot area to a depth of 3 inches, you will need .926 cubic yards.

Theresa Friday is the Residential 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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