

Mulch

Mulch grows healthier plants and makes every garden task easier. Whether your garden is newly planted or decades old, a generous layer of compost, bark, or other mulch in the yard will help:

- Reduce water use by up to 50%.
- Smother weed seedlings and make weeds easier to pull.
- Keep soil loose and absorbent so water doesn't run off.
- Prevent erosion that depletes nutrients and pollutes lakes and streams.
- Feed plants and beneficial soil life that keep plants healthy.



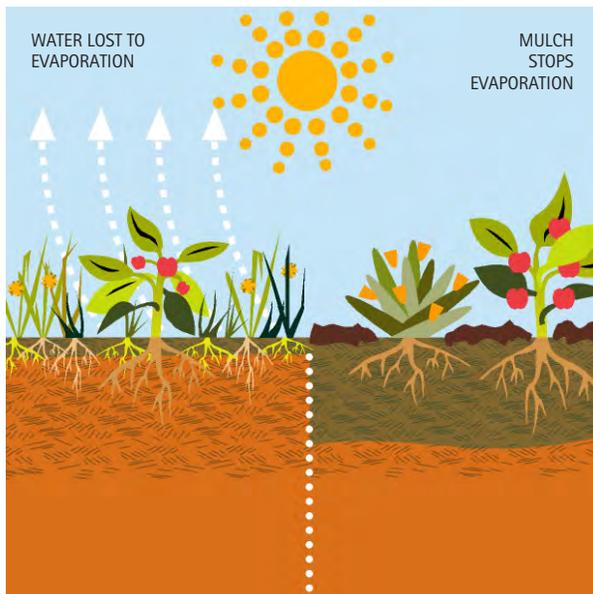
Mulching is Easy

Follow these simple steps to successful use of mulch:

- Pick the best mulch for each job.
- Apply mulch properly.
- Mulch your lawn!

Pick the Best Mulch for Each Job

The best mulch to use depends on the plants, plus what looks good to you and is economical. The most common mulches are ground bark, wood chips, compost, rock and gravel, and weed barrier fabrics. Organic mulches like bark and compost feed plants and soil life as they decompose, while gravel and rock do not need to be replenished regularly.



Mulched plants (right side) experience less water loss and weed growth.

MULCHES FOR ANNUALS AND PERENNIALS

Fast growing, succulent plants thrive with 1-2 inch thick layers of nutrient rich mulches like compost, which can be tilled in to enrich the soil when replanting. Reapply these mulches annually.



Composted yard trimmings, barnyard manure, or biosolids are attractive and mostly free of weed seeds. Compost can be purchased by the bag or the truckload.

Fresh cow or horse manure, leaves, or grass clippings are nutrient rich, but less tidy than compost and can spread weed seeds. To protect consumers' health, uncomposted manure should not be used to mulch food crops.

Straw is a good looking mulch to use in vegetable gardens to keep berries and fruit off the ground and stop the spread of plant diseases.

Clean wood shavings can be used to mulch berries and perennials or to make garden paths. However, decomposing sawdust can steal nitrogen from annual plants. Sawdust should be thoroughly composted with a nitrogen source before applying to annual beds.

MULCHES FOR SHRUBS AND TREES

Woody plants benefit from 2-3 inch layers of woody mulch such as ground bark or wood chips from tree trimmings. These long-lasting mulches protect the soil from compaction, prevent weed germination, and slowly break down to feed plants. Reapply woody mulch every few years.

Fresh bark looks tidy and keeps down weeds, but it may inhibit the growth of young plants and spreading groundcovers. Composted bark looks more natural than fresh and does not inhibit growth of groundcovers.

Use Medium or Medium-Fine bark for most applications. Fine bark can form a crust and stop air or water from reaching roots.

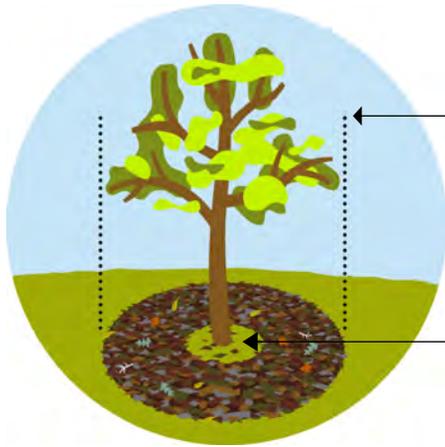
Wood chips make soft and attractive paths and play areas. Clean wood chips are available from landscape supply yards. Softwood chips (fir, hemlock, pine, or cedar) last longer than hardwood chips (alder and maple).

Arborist wood chips include a natural looking mix of materials that helps keep the surface porous—but may not fit into groomed landscapes. Many tree trimming services will deliver wood chips for free, though amounts and quality will vary.

Crushed rock or gravel make low maintenance, long-lasting mulches. However, they do not decompose to nourish plants, and they reflect heat that can stress some plants.



Apply Mulch Properly and Spread with Care



Spread mulch as far as plant's branches spread

Keep mulch away from plant stems and crowns.

Mulches can be brought into the garden by wheelbarrows or buckets. Spread by hand or use stiff rakes or garden forks. On large areas, compost or ground bark can be blown in through hoses fed by trucks.

- 🌿 **Remove weeds before spreading mulches.**
- 🌿 **Keep all mulches at least a few inches** from plant stems and crowns to prevent rot or damage by small rodents (e.g., mice, voles), slugs, and other pests that can hide under mulch.
- 🌿 **Spread mulches over** entire planting beds or in rings around each plant.
- 🌿 **Maintain a grass-free mulch ring** at least 3 feet wide around individual trees growing in lawns.

What About Weed Barriers?

A variety of barriers can be laid under mulch to help smother spreading grasses and weeds, and slow decomposition of organic mulches. But weed barriers must be used with care.

- 🌿 **Woven mesh weed barrier fabrics** are porous enough to let water and air through to roots, though water will run off them on slopes. As mulch and fabric break down, weeds can grow through, making it difficult to weed or remove the barrier.

SHEET MULCHING

The No-Dig Way to Build Soil

Sheet mulching is an easy way to smother old lawns and weed patches to create new garden areas or to improve soil. It imitates soil building in forests by simply laying organic materials on top of the ground to slowly decompose. Sheet mulch will not reliably kill perennial weeds like quack grass, morning glory, and other weeds that spread by roots.

Sheet mulch is commonly made with layers of free or inexpensive organic materials such as fall leaves, fresh grass clippings, barnyard manure, wood chips, ground bark, sawdust, cardboard, and newspaper. Shrubs and trees can be planted in holes through the mulch.

MOST ATTRACTIVE MULCH LAYER ON TOP



1-3 INCHES LEAF MULCH OR DECOMPOSED ORGANIC MATTER



CARDBOARD OR NEWSPAPER WEED BARRIER



1-3 INCHES FRESH GRASS CLIPPINGS OR BARNYARD MANURE





🌿 **Non-porous plastic films** can be used to smother unwanted lawns (see "Sheet Mulching" on previous page) or temporarily control weeds in annual gardens. They should not be left on beds after planting because they prevent water and air from reaching roots.

🌿 **Cardboard or newspaper sections** (single sheets are not thick enough) are an organic way to smother weeds and slow mulch decomposition on garden paths, and perennial or shrub beds. They decompose in 1-2 years.

Mulch Your Lawn!

Grasscycling and topdressing are simple ways to rejuvenate soil under existing lawns. Both methods fertilize the grass, feed beneficial soil life, and improve soil quality.

Grasscycling

Leaving clippings on the lawn when you mow can reduce fertilizer needs and cut mowing times by half—and it does not cause thatch! The *Lawn* guide includes more tips on how to get the best results.

- Any mower can be used to grasscycle by removing the bag and covering the outlet shoot. Most new mowers have an optional shoot cover and are designed to cut clippings finely and blow them into the grass so few clumps are left on the lawn.
- For best results, cut the lawn often enough to remove less than 1 inch each time.
- Keep mower blades sharp for best results.
- When grass is wet or long, run mower over the lawn a few times. Clippings can be thrown into a central area and raked up for composting or used as mulch if necessary. These extra efforts still take less time than bagging clippings.

Topdressing

Topdressing lawns with fine compost, or a mix of sand and compost, adds nutrients and improves soil. For best results core-aerate first, so compost can filter down the core holes to roots.

RESOURCES

Bellevue's Natural Lawn and Garden website
www.bellevuewa.gov/naturallandcare.htm

Bellevue's Natural Gardening Guides

Composting Food Scraps • *Composting Yard Trimmings*
• *Drip and Soak* • *Fertilizer* • *Garden Design* • *Lawn Alternatives* • *Lawns* • *Mulch* • *Pests, Weeds, and Diseases*
• *Plant Right* • *Seasonal Calendar* • *Soil* • *Watering*

For copies, visit Bellevue's Natural Lawn and Garden website (*above*) or call Bellevue Utilities at 425-452-6932.

Natural Yard Care Neighborhoods

www.naturallandcare.info

The Garden Hotline

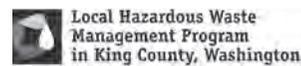
www.gardenhotline.org or 206-633-0224

Grow Smart, Grow Safe

www.growsmartgrowsafe.org

- Topdress with fine-screened compost, or use a 50:50 mix of coarse sand and compost on clay soils.
- Spread topdressing with a shovel, then rake to even it out. Or have a contractor use a spreader or blower truck on large lawns.
- Up to 1/4 inch of topdressing can be spread without aerating.
- After core-aerating, up to 1/2 inch of topdressing can be applied.

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