



Mulch for the Garden

When Master Gardeners talk with people about planting a garden, the most common reason they cite for not planting is weeds, and the chore of weeding the plot. Most Master Gardeners would disagree, making the case that weeding is one of the few jobs that give you the opportunity to see where you began, know how long it took you to finish, and give you the visual reward of having accomplished the task. Weeding gives you a terrific excuse to spend time among your flowers. However, if you have neither the time nor the temperament to weed your gardens, you can mulch instead to reduce weeds.

Mulch actually has many benefits. It reduces the germination of weeds. Mulch helps retain moisture in the soil and conserves water; and mulch is far more attractive in a formal or vegetable garden than a wide expanse of seemingly useless dirt. Finally it insulates the soil against the heat of a Georgia summer and protects it from drying winds.

Local garden centers sell a wide variety of mulch, including bark chips, pine needles, and composted wood chips. Any organic mulch is a great choice in the garden. You can even use compost or composted leaves for mulch. These organic mulches will improve the soil texture in addition to the reduction in weeds and improvement in water retention.

There are some mulches you should avoid. Don't use peat moss to mulch your plants; once it dries it actually repels water and the soil underneath can become dry, killing the plants you have worked to grow. Avoid rocks for mulch, as our hot Georgia Summers can really heat them up and they could turn your garden into an oven! Fresh woodchips are mostly carbon and will steal nitrogen from the plants soil in their urgency to begin composting. UGA Extension experts recommend stacking fresh woodchips and allowing them to weather and stabilize for months or even a year before using them as mulch.

At summer's end after you have pulled up the dead annuals and taken them and the dead leaves and other garden rubbish to your compost pile, give

your garden a final raking. Then mulch the open soil with either a layer of shredded leaves or some pine straw. You will like the neat and clean look of the mulch and you can till it into the soil when spring comes again when your garden is hungry for organic matter.

The author of this article, Nanci Shipley, is a Paulding County Master Gardener Extension Volunteer. As representatives of the University of Georgia Cooperative Extension, Master Gardener Extension Volunteers are trained experts, who answer questions about home horticulture, sustainable landscaping, and environmentally friendly gardening practices using unbiased, research-based information from the University of Georgia. For more information on gardening in Paulding, contact a Master Gardener or the County Extension Agent at the Paulding County Cooperative Extension Office at 770-443-7616 or check us out online at www.ugaextension.org/paulding.

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| For more information and details contact Paulding County UGA Extension Master Gardener Extension Volunteers 530 West Memorial Drive Dallas, GA 30132 | Email: uge2223@uga.edu Website: www.ugaextension.org/paulding Subscribe to our Home and Garden email newsletter at our website Phone 770-443-7616 |
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