

MULCH

GARDENING'S SECRET OF SECRETS

When you extol the virtues of mulch you begin to sound like an overly enthusiastic salesperson. It is claimed to hold water and fertiliser, improve the structure of soil, encourage beneficial organisms like earthworms and soil microbes, increase humidity, cut reflective glare, make the garden look better and make plants grow more successfully.

WOW! CAN MULCH REALLY DO THOSE THINGS?

The answer is **YES**, and even more.

Go into any forest and you'll see a layer of mulch consisting of fallen leaves, twigs, animal droppings, bark and even decaying trees. This layer of mulch is constantly being added to from above and at the same time it's being broken down and absorbed into topsoil. Then you have just to ask the question " do plants grow in a rainforest?

Mulching is a cheap, effective and natural way to help your garden prosper all year round, particularly during summer. It conserves moisture and insulates the roots of the plants from the extremes of hot and cold. Mulches can prevent excessive runoff, restrict weed germination and growth as well as adding valuable nutrients back into the soil.

HOW TO APPLY MULCH :

The first step is to moisten both the mulching material and the soil you are about to cover. When some organic materials dry out it can be almost impossible to re-wet when in garden beds. Aim to carpet the soil to a depth of 8 to 12 cm.

If mulching material is piled up around the base of a trunk it can prevent bark from breathing and lead to Australia's best known form of tree disease -ringbarking.

As organic mulches break down, the heat and bacterial activity can cause the bark to rot causing this ringbarking effect and consequently the death of the plant.

To prevent this happening, keep the mulch at least 5cm away from the stem of the plant. This is especially important when mulching with manures and non-aged composted material.

If you use uncomposted or raw materials like sawdust, straw, woodchips or pinebark, they will take plant food from the soil as they break down.

This can lead to a mild form of nitrogen starvation for your plants. It's a good idea to feed your plants with a balanced fertiliser such as Waldecks All Purpose fertiliser to compensate for this nitrogen loss.

The minimum spread that you should aim for, when applying mulch, is the entire area under the foliage of the plant except near the stem. This is where the feeder roots are concentrated. To see the whole garden bed covered is great, as it unites the plants and gives that finished look.

What mulching materials are available? Compost is probably the least expensive and most desirable medium. It is usually made from household vegetable scraps, leaves, and lawn clippings.

Prepacked materials such as Waldecks Mulching Compost, Karri and Peat Mulch, Waldecks pulverised Cow and Sheep manure, Waldecks Multimix, Waldecks Bio-ganic and Waldecks Pure Peat are very convenient.

Straw on it's own or over a layer of saturated newspaper makes a lethal barrier to even perennial weeds like couch and kikuyu. This is where our weekend newspapers really come to the fore. You see they are so thick that no plant can get to see the light of day under it's shadow hence all weeds expire. In the words of Bill Mollison the father of permaculture 'this is how to turn bad news into good news'.

Inorganic materials such as stone, crushed tile, woven weed matting, brick rubble and gravel can also be used as mulch. They perform most of the functions of organic mulch, except they don't add plant nutrients to the soil nor encourage bacterial action, nor retain moisture as well.

The use of black plastic sheeting either as a mulch on it's own, or as a base to place other mulches on is definitely not recommended. Moisture condenses under the plastic, over a period of time this encourages the roots of plants to congregate close to the surface. On a hot day the black plastic draws the heat and it can lead to the roots being cooked.

Happy mulching!