

Mulch in Gardens and Landscapes
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While it's best to leave grass clippings on the lawn when mowing, if mulch is needed for a vegetable or flower garden; go ahead and catch clippings now and then for this purpose.

Using grass as mulch in annual flower and vegetable gardens is a good way to control weeds, conserve soil moisture and maintain cooler soil temperatures during summer. And to increase soil organic matter after the clippings decompose.

When using grass as mulch, do not use clippings from lawns to which herbicides have been applied for weed control. Allow grass clippings to dry some before using as mulch around plants. Green clippings can heat up and burn tender plants.

Wait until about mid-May to mulch plants to allow soil temperatures to warm. Warm season vegetables and flowers grow best if soils have a chance to warm to optimum temperatures.

Use only a two to three inch layer of grass and keep clippings six inches away from plant stems. If grass mulch is too deep, it can repel water and reduce soil oxygen which limits root growth and function.

Mulch is good for perennial flowers, trees and shrubs for the same reasons it is beneficial for annual flowers and vegetables. While grass clippings can be used as mulch, it is not as ornamental and decomposes quickly.

The best mulch for perennial and woody plants is wood chips, bark, corn cobs and other organic mulches placed on bare, but moist soil.

As with grass clippings around plants, keep mulch away from plant stems and only use a three to four inch deep layer. Mulch piled against plant stems holds moisture around the stems and can lead to decay.

Too deep of a mulch layer reduces oxygen exchange between air and soil. Keep in mind that roots need equal amounts of oxygen and water. This is why overwatering is harmful to plants and why soils should be kept moist but not saturated. And many should be allowed to dry briefly between irrigation.

Inorganic mulch, like rock, is often used and placed on a weed mat. While this is a common practice, know that it reduces oxygen exchange with soil and greatly reduces organic matter being returned to the soil to decompose and benefit soil microorganisms, many of which play a key role in soil structure and plant growth.

Crumb rubber, which is ground up tires, is one mulch that should not be used around plants. Although rocks can increase the temperature around plants and create heat stress, crumb rubber has been shown to increase air temperature around plants to as high as 120 degrees Fahrenheit.

For detailed information on different types of landscape mulches, Nebraska Extension has a circular titled *Mulching the Landscape*. It is available to purchase or as a free download at extensionpubs.unl.edu.

Once at the site, search for the title to locate this publication. It covers the pros and cons of many different types of mulch, both organic and inorganic; and covers the correct way to mulch plants to benefit and not harm them.

Like many things in life, mulch is also one of those things where too much of a good thing can turn out to be bad.