

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

Leaving grass clippings on a lawn will not contribute to thatch. Clippings are high in water and readily decompose to add organic matter to soil and increase nutrients. Mow often enough so no more than one-third of the grass blade is removed at each mowing. Clippings will rapidly decompose.

If grass clippings are used as mulch in annual flower and vegetable gardens, this is a good way to control weeds, conserve soil moisture and maintain cooler soils during summer. And to increase soil organic matter as 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 before placing plants. Green clippings can heat up and burn tender plants.

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

Only use a one to two-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.

While grass clippings could be used as mulch for perennial flowers, trees and shrubs, it is not as ornamental and decomposes quickly. The best mulch for perennial and woody plants is wood chips, bark, chopped corn cobs and other organic mulches placed on bare, but moist soil.

As with grass clippings, 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 this can lead to decay, even on tree trunks.

Too deep of a mulch layer reduces oxygen exchange between air and soil. Keep in mind 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 soils should be allowed to dry slightly between irrigation.

Inorganic mulch, like rock or crumb rubber, is often used on top of 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 soil to decompose and benefit soil microorganisms, many of which play a key role in soil structure and plant growth.

For information on different types of mulch, Nebraska Extension has a publication titled *Mulching the Landscape*. It is available at extensionpubs.unl.edu. It covers the pros and cons of different types of mulch, organic and inorganic, and describes the correct way to mulch plants so as not to harm them.