

Mulch 101

Mulching your flower bed or vegetable garden is a critical part of the planting process. You've invested a lot of time and money into the plants and shrubs you want, now you want to protect them! Let's examine how mulch can help do just that.

Mulch...

... acts as an insulator for your plants' roots, keeping them cooler in the summer and warmer in the winter.

... helps your soil retain moisture - especially important in our drought-stricken areas!

... reduces the growth of weeds (notice, we didn't say "prevents" weeds because wind-blown seeds can settle on the surface of your mulch and sprout).

... helps prevent soil erosion.

... reduces splash transmitted soil related diseases.

... adds nutrients to the soil as it decomposes (this depends on the type of mulch selected).

... looks great!

What to look for in a mulch

All right, so we know mulching is essential, but what kind of mulch is best? There is no one answer to this question - personal preferences play a role in choosing the look you want from your mulch. That being said, there are some general considerations to keep in mind when buying mulch:

1. Look for "bark" mulch - mulch that consists of the bark of a tree as opposed to wood fibers from the center of the tree. As we all know, bark is the protective coating of the tree that helps it ward off insects and disease, whereas the wood fibers are what insects like termites like to eat. Which do you want in your yard?

Note: the exceptions to bark mulch are cedar and cypress mulches; these are considered whole log mulches because, you guessed it, the wood and bark are both used to make them. Why doesn't this cause a problem with insects? The answer is that bugs cannot digest the oils in these types of wood, so, for the most part, they just stay away from them. This makes them safe to use as mulches.



Double Hammered Hardwood Mulch



Cedar Mulch

2. Understand what you're getting when you use mulch from a construction site or yard clean-up (as opposed to a saw mill where you get bark mulch) - construction debris can, and usually will, have all kinds of things mixed in it. This includes ingredients such as all parts of chopped up trees or shrubs (bark and wood fibers), seeds, possible insects or infestations, and poison ivy/oak. While this may not be a bad choice for a large natural area, you may want to think twice about putting it in a flower or vegetable garden or near your home. You're putting your new plants at risk by not using an aged mulch and inviting problems with infestations of weeds and insects.
3. Purchase from a reputable supplier - believe it or not, there is an exact science to processing mulch that takes into account such things as the temperature and age of the bark. Mulch contains millions of living organisms that are constantly in motion in the decomposing process; the friction from this motion is what causes you to see "smoke" coming from a pile of mulch in cold weather! Reputable mulch suppliers monitor the internal temperature and degree of decomposition of a pile of mulch, turning it and determining when it has reached the optimum age (usually it takes four to six months depending on rain and temperature conditions). Putting mulch that is not aged properly around fresh plants can cause them to "burn" in the harsh sun.

Double Hammered Hardwood - a favorite type of mulch

A favorite mulch of landscapers and contractors in the Charlotte area is Double Hammered Hardwood Mulch. It offers a dark, rich color, excellent erosion control and moisture retention, and excels as a soil enrichment! Because it is double shredded, the pieces fuse together somewhat to form a matt that stays in place better than nuggets or other shredded mulches. This makes it a great choice for inclines where other types of mulch may wash away in a rain.



Double Hammered Hardwood Mulch in front garden bed.

How much mulch do I need?

Once you've selected your mulch, you need to know that this is not a situation where "more is better"! A 3" layer of mulch is just right; even if you are just freshening an existing layer of mulch, don't put down more than 3" total. (A thicker layer inhibits moisture and air from reaching roots.) You especially don't

want to pile mulch up against the base of trees; this action causes the bark to rot, weakening the tree's immune system as well as preventing water and air from reaching the roots.

Mulch is sold in bags at many stores or by the cubic yard at landscape material suppliers. Bulk mulch tends to be of better quality and less expensive than purchasing bags. When figuring how much you need, a simple rule of thumb is that one cubic yard of mulch covers 100 sq. ft (a 10' x 10' area) to a depth of 2 ½" – 3". The staff at Blue Max Materials is always willing to help you figure out how much you need based on basic measurements of the length and width of your beds.

Are colored mulches safe?

Colored mulches have become more and more popular, primarily because of its dramatic color contrast with other features in a landscape. When you buy a dyed mulch, it's even more important to buy from a reputable supplier. Find out the wood content and type of dye used before making any purchases. Some colored mulches have been made from ground up pallets; usually there's no way of knowing where these pallets have been or what they've been used for; liquids could easily have been spilled on them and since wood naturally soaks up any liquid spills, you could be putting a lot more chemicals in your yard and in your ground than you bargained for. You also want to make sure the dyes used are safe for your soil, especially around wells and vegetable gardens.



Red Mulch

Can I use decorative gravel as mulch?

Yes, gravel can be used as mulch – it's a much less expensive option, or so it seems initially! You're paying more for the stone up front, but you don't have to replace it nearly as often. However, using stone does have some important drawbacks:

- Stone will absorb a lot of the sun's heat and then re-radiate that heat even after sundown, causing some plants to burn.
- Stone does nothing to improve the soil quality.
- Stone mulches can be difficult to keep clean. As leaves and dust blow into the stone, the stone can become stained and filled with debris. Some types of stone trap fallen leaves and pine needles – they can be difficult to remove even with a blower!
- When used around a pool deck, stone will sometimes wash onto the deck after a driving rain; when that happens, it can really be hard on bare feet if you step on an errant pebble.

Mulch is a vital part of the landscaping process. Since it also represents an investment of your time and money, it's important that you make the best choices for your situation. The staff at Blue Max Materials is always available to answer your questions and help you with your decision.

For more information on mulches, visit www.SiteOne.com/Hardscapes