

Mulch in the desert

Any conversation about gardening must include at least a few words about mulch. This is one critical element in having a garden that is water thrifty and less plagued by weeds. Mulch is almost anything that covers the soil, limiting evaporation, keeping light from the surface and maintaining a relatively even temperature around plant roots.

Mulch can be more than a practical necessity, but it can also be an aesthetic addition, as it helps weave a landscape together into a more coherent whole.

With such diverse benefits, it only makes sense to have a layer of mulch on any garden. It is important that the layer be no more than about 4" thick, less when using rock. Many types of materials are available, and what is best for one group of plants might not be best for several others.

Most people with desert landscapes are familiar with rock. Does everyone even think of this as a form of mulch? They should. Rock mulch is meant to be reminiscent of desert pavement – the stones that form the surface of the wild lands in this region – although the natural rock mulch is more than a uniform layer of red or buff colored ½" stone.



Desert Pavement

The landscape rock we are most familiar with does serve as mulch in many ways. Like other materials, it helps conserve water and blocks light from the soil surface, which inhibits weed seed germination. It is only a good idea, however, for plants that are desert natives or well-adapted to this environment. The soil beneath the mulch remains cool and dark, but as the light reflects off the stone, the air above it becomes warmer.

The plant receives a mixed message;

the roots are sensing that there little temperature or water stress, but the aboveground portion is considerably hotter and drier. Desert plants are more accustomed to this, but many other landscape plants do not thrive under these conditions.

When growing plants that evolved in a cooler, moister environment, other mulch choices can be better. Many landscape plants grow well with wood mulch such as chipped or shredded bark. As these slowly decompose, they release a small amount of nutrients into the soil. Many of them are slightly acidic, which can benefit the alkaline soils that are so common here.

Another alternative is rubber mulch. This ground rubber product is dyed to appear like wood, red or brown. If a landscape does not include edibles, this can be a reasonable selection.

For a garden that is producing vegetables rather than shrubs and flowers, a simple mulch can be straw or hay. Either one can work very well, and at a low cost. Probably few people would think that a layer of straw is particularly attractive, unfortunately, hence it is usually reserved for less obvious parts of the landscape.

Whether it is rock, straw, wood bark or rubber, mulch can provide many benefits to garden plants for water conservation and regulation of soil temperatures. What is key is to match the mulch to the plant.

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