

Mulches

Many homeowners have already removed their lawns as a first step toward creating a water-thrifty landscape. During this time of water shortages and increasing temperatures, gardeners and landscapers must recognize how important it is to use mulch. Not everyone is familiar with mulch, however, and some of the information available can be confusing.

Put simply, mulch can be anything placed on top of a planting bed to reduce evaporation, cool the soil and reduce weed growth. It can also reduce soil erosion and compaction, two problems that can afflict both gardens and wild areas.

People hear terms like living, organic and inorganic mulches. Curiously enough, a lawn could be considered a kind of living mulch. In places where water is less limited, the idea of growing a dense stand of plants to crowd out weeds and recycle water vapor is not a bad one. Such a thick planting could control weeds with fewer herbicides. Living mulch requires maintenance like any other landscape plant, and this includes an unacceptably large amount of irrigation water.

In this drought-stricken part of the world, water conservation needs to be a primary goal and covering the soil is one good way to begin. Mulch is important not only for this purpose, however. Gardeners are also interested in creating an attractive yard, and a good-looking layer of soil protection can knit a landscape together.



Many kinds of materials can be used as mulch, and it is up to the gardener to decide which would be best for the land and the plants growing in it.

Organic mulch is any material that was relatively recently alive. It may be wood chips, pine needles, peat moss, straw, hay, compost, hulls, cobs, even shells. Technically, it could be manure, but that is rarely a good idea, especially in an urban area.

For vegetables, straw or hay is probably best. Vegetables and herbs can be lovely, but the mulch around

them does not need to be terrifically beautiful, as long as it meets the requirements of water conservation, temperature modulation and weed control.

When landscape appearance is more important than crop yield, wood chips or chipped bark can be attractive.

Rock mulch is both admired and maligned. If it is simply a coat of stones over the soil, with neither plants nor anything else to catch one's attention, it should be criticized. When used properly, it is interesting and practical.

In the desert, the soil has a covering of stones – “desert pavement”. These rocks are different colors and sizes, and embedded in the surface area. Rock mulch is meant to be reminiscent of that desert pavement, although it is usually a single color and uniform size.

Where the plants are desert natives or at least desert-adapted, rock mulch is appropriate. It is not perfect, however. Because it reflects light and heat, it can increase the plants' water demands, particularly when the plant is not well adapted to the environment. Rock mulch also provides no nutrients to the soil, so fertility management is important. Even desert plants need occasional fertilization.

Dr. Angela O'Callaghan is the Social Horticulture Specialist for University of Nevada Cooperative Extension. Contact ocallaghana@unce.unr.edu or 702-257-5581.