

Compost as a Mulch

Discover the Best Garden Mulches

First Edition



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Compost as a Mulch

Want to know one of the easiest ways to improve your gardening efforts?

Go for a walk in a nearby forest!

Seriously, if you're interested in improving your successes in the garden, you must learn to think like mother nature; one of the best places to do that is in a nearby forest.

Once there, stop, kneel down, and touch (and look at) the ground. Do you notice anything? There's not a single inch of exposed soil. In other words, the whole forest floor is covered by a thin layer of decaying leaves, branches, and bark...nature's homemade mulch. Now, take a moment and move some of this mulch aside to reveal the soil underneath. Do you notice anything else? The soil is cool, moist, and it has an abundance of life (e.g. worms, insects, microbes, and fine root hairs).

Now think back to your garden...can you say the same thing about your garden soils? More than likely, the answer is no. Why? Because for the most part, people don't realize the importance of mulching their gardens (including your vegetables).

Well that's all about to change. This short article will introduce you to the benefits of mulching your garden, including some of the best mulches to use. If you haven't already guessed, one of the best mulches for your garden is a thick layer of compost.

Benefits of Mulching

- Holds moisture in soil.
- Provides habitat for microbes.
- Reduces erosion.
- Helps to feed microbes.
- Keeps soil temperatures stable.
- Helps to prevent weeds.



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Best Mulches for Your Garden

1. Compost

Cured compost is one of the finest mulches you can use, especially for your vegetable garden. We annually apply a 2" layer to our gardens. Using compost as a mulch provides your garden with a great source of readily available nutrients (unlike some of the other mulches below), and acts as a great microbial inoculant for your garden soils. One small drawback to using compost as a mulch is that it doesn't tend to resist weeds as well as some of the other mulches listed below.

2. Leaf Mold, Leaves, and Grass Clippings

Leaf mold describes partially-composted leaves. When you add leaf mold to your gardens (2"-3" layer minimum), you'll notice a huge spike in your earthworm population (something all of our gardens can use). We typically recommend using leaf mold on your perennial gardens since it tends to be more fungal dominated. You can also apply uncomposted leaves; however, they will take a little longer to provide nutrients that are accessible to your plants. Try shredding them with your lawn mower before applying them to your soils. Fresh grass clippings also work well as a mulch in annual gardens because they are an excellent food source for bacteria, and most annual-based gardens are dominated by bacteria (versus fungi). If all of this talk about bacteria and fungi is confusing, please visit our [compost tea page](#) for a better explanation.

3. Composted Wood Chips

When mulching our perennial gardens, we like to use composted wood chips. This type of mulch is much different than the typical wood chips that you find at most retailers. Can't find this product in your area? Make it yourself by ordering natural wood chips, and allowing them to compost for a year before applying.



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4. Hay and Straw

Straw is one of the most common types of mulch used in gardens; however, you might want to try using hay instead. Contrary to many other gardener's opinions, we've found less weed seeds in our hay mulches than in our straw. This may just be a function of our current hay and straw provider, however, we recommend you give it a try. Hay can also be quite a bit cheaper than straw, while providing even more nutrients (especially alfalfa hay).

We are by no means against using straw. In fact, Charles Wilber, author of *How to Grow World Record Tomatoes*, used straw mulch for the majority of his world record-setting plants. We'd never argue with his results.

Mulches to **AVOID**

We do not endorse the use of any dyed mulches (e.g. red and black). These dyes are harmful to your soil microbes, and are often used to mask the products in the mulch (e.g. pressure-treated lumber or wooden pallets). We also recommend avoiding all rubber-based mulches. Rubber mulches do help to recycle old tires, but these tires don't belong in our soils.

The Most Important Point to Remember When Mulching is...

Thickness!

Although 1" of mulch is better than no mulch at all, we highly recommend you apply it as thick as you can (within limits). If you can afford to apply a 4"+ layer of mulch, you'll have almost no weed pressure in your gardens.

If you have any compost or mulching questions, please [write to us](#). And remember...we can't become the Web's biggest tribe of compost enthusiasts without your help, so please visit us again soon.

