



What is the Difference Between Mulch & Compost?

by Rose Bonar, Master Gardener

Mulch and compost are words we use that refer to improvements in garden soil. We sometimes use these terms interchangeably and we sometimes use them incorrectly. I will attempt to clarify and give uses for both.

Mulch is applied to the surface of the soil. It can be made of organic or inorganic material. Organic material will eventually decompose (rot and disappear), while inorganic material will not. Because it decomposes, organic mulch will slowly improve the structure and permeability of the soil over time. Mulch can be anything from bark, straw, grass clippings, pine cones, nut hulls (all organic), to rock or gravel (inorganic).

Compost is primarily used as a soil amendment, which is mixed into the soil. Compost changes the chemistry and structure of the soil. Compost can be made at home from a mixture of organic waste from the kitchen, leaves and small twigs from the garden, and some newspaper clippings. The compost pile needs to be turned and kept moist so that the organic materials break down. It is ready to use when it looks like soil. You can also buy it by the bag or scoop at big box stores and nurseries.

What is the purpose of mulch and compost?

Both mulch and compost are valuable components for a sustainable garden.

Mulch, since it is added to the top of the soil, comes between the sun and the soil. It insulates the soil, keeping it cooler in the summer and warmer in the winter. It helps to keep the water in the soil from evaporating and the plant roots from drying out. Mulch keeps the seeds of weeds in the dark and helps keep them from germinating. During a drought, mulch is effective in saving water from evaporation, making it more available to the plants. It is very helpful in keeping down the weeds.

Compost is added and mixed into the soil. It helps to change soil by making it easier to work with and more productive. It makes the soil's nutrients more available to plants. Hard clay soil can be made more workable by adding compost. The drainage of sandy soil can be improved by adding compost.

What are the advantages and disadvantages of mulch and compost?

When applying mulch to your garden there are several things to keep in mind. One consideration is leaf drop. If you will be raking the surface of the ground, you may end up raking up the mulch too. You may want to



MULCH
VS
COMPOST



consider fine mulch that the rake tines will pass through or you may want to consider rocks or gravel that you can use your leaf blower on. Remember however, that rocks tend to actually make the soil warmer, so they take away one of the big reasons for applying mulch in the first place. Avoid putting mulch directly against the trunk of a tree. It will keep the tree trunk moist and provide a habitat for fungal diseases that attack a tree trunk. Apply the mulch in a donut shape around the tree, leaving the trunk in the hole of the donut.

When making your own compost, be careful to not throw your vegetable and weed seeds into your compost bin. One spring we had several interesting “weeds” coming up in our flower bed. When I pulled them, I found the “weed” was growing out of a peach pit! A weed is a plant growing where you don’t want it!

Timing:

Mulch can be applied any time. It is wise to apply it after you clear the area of weeds and rake. It is good to have a thick layer of mulch before the summer heat arrives.

Compost is usually applied when you are working up a new flower or vegetable bed. You can work it into small areas any time you are planting.

If you'd like to learn more about mulch, the Master Gardeners are conducting a Composting Workshop at Hurley Elementary School on Saturday, September 19th from 9 a.m.- 12 noon. We will be building a state of the art composting bin plus showing how to compost at home.

For more detailed information, the Master Gardeners have posted several articles on the topics of mulch and compost on their website under the general heading of Soils – Composts – Fertilizers

http://ucanr.edu/sites/UC_Master_Gardeners/http_ ucanredu_sites UC_Master_Gardeners_Newspaper_Articles_254/.

Want to be a Master Gardener? If you are interested in expanding your gardening knowledge and sharing your horticultural passion with others, the Master Gardener program may be for you. A new training class starts in January 2016. The weekly classes will be held Wednesday mornings from January through early June. **To be considered, you must attend an orientation on October 14, 2015 from 3-4:30 pm and fill out an on-line application by 4pm on November 2, 2015.** Potential trainees will be interviewed. More detailed information can be found on the Tulare/Kings County Master Gardener website at <http://cetulare.ucanr.edu> or contact Sue Long, Master Gardener Program Coordinator, at 684-3343 or solong@ucanr.edu.

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