



Drought Tolerant Landscaping

Part One of a Four Part Series



These are the first three tips of seven that are recommended for landscaping during a drought.

Mulch. Mulch holds in the moisture to help reduce watering needs and can look attractive in areas where there's little landscaping or plants have not filled in. As it breaks down, it can also provide nutrients to your plants and improves soil quality. It can help in breaking down clay soil, improve the holding capacity of sandy soil, and can help control weeds.

There are, however, some negatives to mulching too. Mulch can harbor insects, snails, and slugs. So you should not mulch around seedlings or young vegetable plants. Young vegetable plants also need warm earth to grow and mulching can keep it too cool. Also, mulching eggplants, bell peppers, and possibly tomatoes too soon can inhibit growth. Placing mulch too close to the base of woody plants can cause root rot. Organic materials that are not partially decomposed, such as wood chips, can rob the soil of nitrogen. Bare soil may help prevent spring frost better than mulching.

There are many different choices for mulching. Bark chips and ground bark, compost, grass clippings (chance of containing weed seeds or Bermuda grass), hay and straw, leaf mold (must be carefully prepared or purchased), newspapers, peat moss, pine needles (may be toxic to some plants), sawdust (will inhibit water penetration), wood chips, black plastic (will store heat well in the winter), clear plastic, white plastic (will reflect the heat in the summer), and non-woven polypropylene fabric. There are pros and cons to each choice, so carefully assess your needs before deciding on mulching.

Compost. The sponge-like nature of compost means that rain or irrigation water will be absorbed and stay in your soil. To use compost as a soil amendment you can mix it into flower bed and vegetable garden areas to improve the soil before planting. Mix a 3-4 inch layer of compost into newly reclaimed or poor soils. Mix a ½-3 inch layer of compost into annual garden beds at least once a year. Do not plant trees in small holes filled with compost, as this could cause root restriction.

Focus on your trees. In times of drought you expect your lawn and garden will suffer, but don't forget about your trees. If you decide to turn off your irrigation altogether, remember to give your trees a deep watering with a hose about every two weeks. Losing your lawn isn't so bad and may be a good thing. But if you lose your trees, you've lost years of a shade canopy, a nice wildlife habitat, its value in terms of home energy conservation (according to the USDA, strategically placed trees save up to 56% on annual air-conditioning costs), and you could possibly lose some good food (if you have fruit and nut trees).

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