

## What Is Mulch?

Mulch is almost any material (decaying leaves, cardboard sheets, straw, manure, bark) that is spread on the soil and around plants to enrich and/or insulate the soil. Note that some products like rubber mulch or newsprint might be toxic to plants.

## Why Mulch?

Mulch can reduce water loss from the soil (evaporation) and reduce weed pressure. Mulch can also cool the soil surface and so reduce plant stress. However, mulch can also cause diseases.

## What types of mulch are there?

Common mulches and general comments:

- **Straw** (e.g., from wheat) – Easy to spread, but little nutritional value. Can make nitrogen less available to the plant if incorporated in the soil.
- **Manure** – Can have food safety concerns if not composted. Fresh manure can burn plants because of the salts. Most people suggest composting of manures.
- **Woodchips and leaves** – Fallen leaves and wood chips tend to be low in nitrogen, so they can cause some reduction in nitrogen available to the plant (if incorporated).
- **Compost** – In many ways, the best type of mulch. Being already partially decomposed, compost can make a quicker contribution to plant nutrition.
- **Newspaper and cardboard** – These usually work fine, but you have to check that any ink is not toxic to the plants.
- **Stones** can be used, but obviously not when growing most annual crops where some form of soil preparation is required.
- For **non-organic mulches** (e.g., rubber sold at some outlets) ensure the product is suitable to be added and not toxic to the environment.

With organic mulches, you need to be conscious of possible diseases.

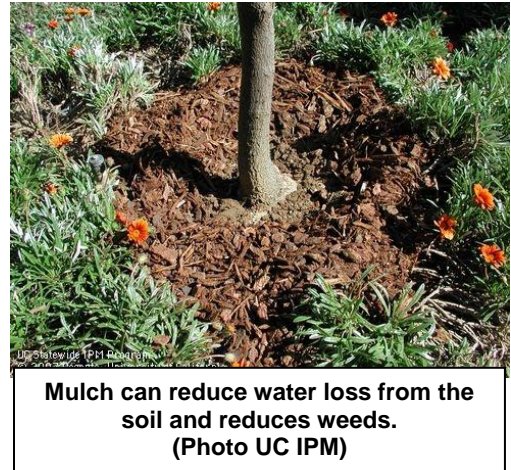
## How do I manage Mulch?

It is normally best to keep a little space (a couple of inches) between the mulch and the plant stem

**Mulch for weeds.** *"If you can see the soil, then the weed can see the sun."*

Add enough mulch to cover the soil surface completely

**Mulch to reduce water loss.** While any amount of mulch will help, the more the better effect on reducing evaporation from the soil surface. Irrespective of the mulch type, a general rule of thumb is 5 inches of mulch to reduce evaporation from the soil surface.



Mulch can reduce water loss from the soil and reduces weeds.  
(Photo UC IPM)