

Q. I am confused about mulching my garden. I would like to use fir bark. What time of year should I add mulch? Does mulch really need to be kept away from the trunks of my plants? How deep should the mulch be? Does it matter what kind of mulch I use?

A. Mulch refers to any material that you place on top of the soil, from plastic to wood chips or compost. Mulches have several primary uses; weed control and moisture retention. If you are using mulch for weed control, keep it on the soil year-round as in this climate we have weeds that germinate in the fall and in the spring. Wood chip mulches need to be at least 3" deep to work as weed controls, keeping light from the soil surface. Most homeowners do not keep mulches deep enough, and then get frustrated when weeds pop on through. Most weed seeds kept in the dark stay dormant. Weeds with underground reserves such as *Oxalis pes-caprae*, or Bermuda grass can reach right through most mulch. If those are the kinds of weeds you need to control, consider other options as well.

If you want to use fir bark, the depth of the mulch needed will depend on the size of the material. The coarser the bark, the deeper it will need to be to block light. Keep mulches away from the base of plants to prevent crown rot and hiding places for bark nibblers such as voles. When you are spreading the mulch you can make barriers from cardboard boxes to place around woody plants and trees, or simply use your hands and pull the mulch back. Remove the boxes unless you like that look.

Mulches reduce the loss of water from the soil, and moderate soil temperature. If you want soils to warm up in the spring to plant summer vegetables or flowers, pull mulches back. If you want soils to stay cooler, keep them in place. The materials you use do make a difference. Acidic material like pine needles may be appropriate under acid loving plants as long as it is kept at least 30' away from your home to minimize fire risk. Redwood, cedar and fir barks contain naturally occurring chemicals that make them more resistant to decay. Walnut hulls should not be used except as pathway material where you do not intend to plant due to the juglone content which inhibits growth. Cocoa hulls look lovely, but are quite expensive and mildew if they remain wet. Wood chip mulch from arborists should be seed free. Gardeners who have used 'chippermulch' from *Albizia julibrissin* in the summer when the seeds are viable, and have had hundreds of unwanted trees germinate in every mulched corner of the garden. Black plastic mulches are non-biodegradable, do not allow air or water to penetrate and are only effective for several years.

Mid-winter is not an easy time to apply mulch. The winter weeds have already germinated, and the soil is saturated after these last rains. It would be best to wait until the soil dries a bit and after you have removed any seed bearing winter weeds, mid to late spring.