

Organic Options

Mulching It Up

There are three basic things you need for warm/hot weather care in the garden: water, shade and mulch. Water and shade are pretty basic and self-explanatory, while mulch seems to raise more questions. What is mulch? Why do I need it? What can I use as mulch? How much do I use? How often should I need to replace it? Should I remove old mulch? When should I lay down mulch? Let's back it up.

What is mulch?

Mulch is defined as a material spread around or over a plant to enrich or insulate the soil. As a verb, to treat or cover with mulch.

Why do you need it?

As the definition states, it is used to insulate the soil. Mulch acts for the soil just as insulation acts for your house. In the winter mulch will help keep the soil from freezing while in the summer months it keeps the soil cooler. This is all important to protect the roots from extreme temperatures, hot and cold.

The definition also states it enriches the soil, so as it breaks down nutrients are added to the soil. Mulch will also help keep the soil moist, a necessity in southern Arizona. It also helps reduce weeds and a freshly mulched garden has a high aesthetic appeal.

What can you use as mulch?

There are a lot of options here. A commercial mulch can be bought from the nursery. Wood chips can also be used. If you have enough on hand, compost, is a good mulch that will not only insulate the soil but enrich it very nicely.

Other materials available include gravel, rubber chips, manure, pine needles, grass clippings, hay, shredded newspaper and leaf litter. You should notice that most of the listed items are organic (originating from plant or animal sources). These materials will break down over time and add nutrients to the soil. And a rich soil lends to healthier plants.

Heat retaining materials, such as rubber, rock and gravel, are NOT recommended to use in southern Arizona. These materials will heat up the soil and roots of the plants they are used on and make it harder for fertilizers to get to the root system.

How much do you use? A lot. General recommendations say to put down at least a 2" layer of mulch. Here in southern Arizona where humidity is non-existent, a thicker layer will help with water retention during the +100° heat. Plants can get dehydrated just like people can

For potted plants the full width of the pot is ideal. In-ground plants should have the mulch extend past the spread of the canopy or drip line of the plant. This distance will ensure the spread of the roots is covered and protected.

How often should you replace mulch? Well, that depends. Non-organic mulch isn't going to break down like organic mulches so the need to replace non-organics is greatly reduced. The need to replace organic mulches will depend on how fast they break down.

Compost and composted mulch (two different things) are already breaking down and may need to be replaced or reapplied sooner than pine needles and wood chips. The environment itself is a contributing factor as well. Climates with humidity lend to faster decomposition of organic mulches as opposed to the aridity of the desert southwest.

Areas with freezing winter will also need and application of mulch before the first frost along with the summer application. Southern Arizona rarely has freezing temperatures so we would only lay down mulch before the summer heat.

Should you remove old mulch? You don't have to. A good organic mulch should have broken down and been incorporated into the



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underlying soil by the time you should be laying down more.

Removing old mulch is also removing desired nutrients and organic matter needed for a healthy biomass for the soil. It's also a time consuming chore, taking time and energy away from more important tasks (like relaxing in the garden).

If the old mulch isn't incorporated into the soil then you can take a rake or spade to help break it up and mix it into the soil. Wood chips don't always break down well.




As an example...

Removing old mulch may be necessary if you decide to change from a non-organic mulch to an organic mulch, the mulch becomes contaminated in some way or it's not working the way you want it to.

When should you lay down mulch? For protection against summer heat, spring time is the best time to lay down mulch. Mid-spring, like the month of May, has temperatures warm enough to be rid of the winter chill and start new growth and the heat of summer hasn't set in yet.

Laying down the insulating mulch during this time will help keep the soil at a more desirable temperature. This will also help with moisture levels, as the summer heat hasn't dried out the soil yet. In colder climates a layer of mulch should be laid down in late fall to help protect from freezing temperatures and the freeze/thaw process that can damage roots.

Now — go mulch with confidence!

 *Krystal Schmich, RST Member*

ARS Rose Shows — Western US

June 10: Rocky Mountain District Convention and Rose Show
Garden Center, Sugarhouse Park, Salt Lake City UT

June 15: ARS 2024 Calendar Contest, final day to enter

June 18: Denver RS Rose Show; Denver Botanic Gardens, Denver CO

June 24: Southwestern Oregon Rose Society
Coos County Fairgrounds, Oak Pavilion, Myrtle Point OR

August 5: [Portland Rose Society](#) All Miniature Rose Show,
Pittock Mansion, Portland OR

September 16-17: [Portland Rose Society](#) Fall Rose Show,
Washington Square Mall, Portland OR

October 21: [Sierra Foothills Rose Society](#)
Green Acres Nursery & Supply, 7300 Galilee Road, Roseville CA

October 28: [Orange County RS](#) Rose Show — A Presidential Show
Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda CA

October 28: [Butte Rose Society](#)
C.A.R.D Community Center, 545 Vallombrosa Avenue, Chico CA

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