

Make the Mulch of it

Mulch is a layer of material such as wood chips, bark, grass clippings, leaves, or compost placed on the soil surface around plants and trees.



Why mulch?

Put your yard debris and fallen branches to use. Mulching is a simple way to recycle yard and woody wastes and improve your soil. An effective mulch does the following:

- Feeds the soil as it decomposes, providing nutrients for earthworms and other soil life which are necessary for healthy soil and plants
- Reduces soil erosion on slopes
- Minimizes soil compaction caused by foot traffic
- Inhibits weed growth – less weed pulling (see “A word about weeds” on the next page)
- Insulates the soil from cold in winter and heat in summer
- Increases moisture retention – less watering means more water and money saved

Best uses for mulch

Different materials decompose at different rates, so it’s best to use the right mulch for the setting. Here are some recommendations for mulch use:

- **Grass clippings on beds in the spring** – Even though many home gardeners use mulch mowers now, there are times when grass grows so fast clippings may have to be raked up. Spread regularly in no more than one inch layers over vegetable and flower beds. The thinner layers allow water to penetrate the soil and prevent matting.



- **Deciduous tree leaves on beds in the fall** – Deciduous leaves can be spread as mulch on vegetable and flower beds. Evergreen leaves take longer to decompose and are best suited as a cover on pathways.
- **Compost on beds year-round** – Compost can be spread around beds once a year to add nutrients into the soil. Spreading compost in the fall will help smother winter and annual weeds; in the spring a compost layer will help retain winter moisture.
- **Chipped or shredded wood waste around trees and bushes or on pathways** – Wood waste takes longer to break down and can be used as an effective pathway. It also helps minimize weed growth. Spread 3-6 inches.
- **Sawdust from untreated wood around trees and bushes** – Along with other finely-ground woody materials, sawdust can be used on the surface, but should not be mixed into the soil because these finely ground materials absorb nitrogen from the soil, causing plants to become yellow and stunted.

MORE INFO
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King County

Department of
Natural Resources and Parks
Solid Waste Division

Five Steps to:
**Natural
Yard Care**





Make the Mulch of it

A word about weeds

Most weeds like sun and poor soil. The best way to inhibit weed growth is to create healthy soil, strengthening your plants so that they crowd out the weeds. Reduce annual weeds such as chickweed, bluegrass, sowthistle, purslane, mallow, and shotweed by mulching in the fall to smother their seeds. To minimize weed growth even more, put cardboard down first and then cover with mulch. Reduce perennial weeds such as morning glory, buttercup, clover, horsetail, dandelion, and plantain through more mechanical means – mowing and cutting back repeatedly. For ideas on controlling perennial weeds, see www.kingcounty.gov/weeds.

Wood Chips



For more information

Call the Garden Hotline at **206-633-0224** or email help@gardenhotline.org

Download documents and find more about natural yard care at www.kingcounty.gov/soils. Click on *Documents*

General mulching rules

- Mulch at any time, but early spring, before soil moisture has evaporated, is an excellent time.
- Weed the area and water the soil before applying mulch.
- Spread around plants to the drip line (the diameter of the plant's outermost branches) or cover the entire garden bed.
- Keep mulch a few inches away from the trunks of trees and shrubs to prevent damage to the plants from disease and rodents.
- Spread a thin layer of mulch – 1 to 3 inches. Thick mulches are harmful to shallow-rooted plants such as rhododendrons and azaleas. Otherwise, 3 inches of mulch is safe for most woody plants, and up to 8 inches can be used for large trees.

- Especially on vegetable beds, avoid mulch that has been exposed to herbicides.
- Add more mulch every 2-3 years to continue a supply of nutrients in the soil and maintain good soil coverage.
- Use woody mulches only as a top-dressing. Do not mix into soil as wood absorbs nitrogen and deprives plants of this nutrient.

How to make the best mulch

- Leaves – You can run over dry leaves with a rotary mower to make a fine-textured mulch for annuals and smaller plants.
- Small branches – Rent a small electric chipper to make a fine-textured mulch of woody stalks and branches up to 1 1/4 inches thick, or a gas-powered shredder that processes materials up to 3 inches thick.
- Larger branches – Rent a gas-powered chipper able to handle woody wastes up to 6 inches in diameter, or hire a chipping service to come to your house or neighborhood.

You can rent mulching tools and machines from some tool rental stores. Look under "Rental Service Stores and Yards" in the Yellow Pages or "Lawn and Garden Equipment" to purchase. Call ahead, since not all tool rental stores carry chippers and shredders. Some "Tree Service" companies (in the Yellow Pages) give away wood chips for free, in addition to providing chipping services.

Alternative Formats On Request
206-296-4466 • TTY Relay: 711
1-800-325-6165 ext. 6-4466