

MULCHING

Mulching is an important practice that is often overlooked. Mulching can reduce the time spent in cultivating. A mulch can:

- * Conserve soil water.
- * Control weed growth.
- * Keep soil temperature uniform.
- * Reduce frost damage to fruit.

One of the most effective ways of reducing the need to apply water to garden plants and conserve natural rainfall is to use garden mulches. Mulches are most appropriately used on summer crops when periods of water use are greatest. Mulches provide a barrier that helps prevent moisture loss from the soil by evaporation. They also can be useful in maintaining cooler soil temperatures, controlling weeds, reducing soil compaction, and keeping produce cleaner.

Plastic Mulches

Black polyethylene mulch is preferred because clear plastic mulch promotes weed growth underneath it. Plastics usually are available in rolls from 3-4 feet wide. They are placed over the row or bed, the edges covered with soil, and various sized holes cut for the different crops. Black surfaces absorb heat, warming the soil for earlier production. Later, the foliage shades the plastic, reducing the heating of the soil. These mulches work best with warm-season crops such as tomatoes, melons, peppers, and eggplant, which are usually established by transplant.

Organic mulches

Common organic materials used in gardens include compost, old hay, straw, leaves, shredded newspapers, peat moss, and grass clippings. Using coarse materials requires a 3- to 4-inch layer while fine materials can be applied in 1- to 2-inch layers. Organic mulches serve as insulation, reducing soil warming in the spring, so later season use is recommended. They can be left in place and tilled into the soil during the fall as a source of organic matter. Organic materials should be dried before use. Old or composted materials are preferable. Fresh materials may form molds or slime and repel water if used when green. Also, make sure that organic materials do not contain weed seeds, insects, or disease organisms that may spread to garden crops.

Ten ways to improve water use in the garden

1. Water deeply, but no deeper than the root zone of the plant.
2. Water slowly. Reduce the flow.
3. Water infrequently, but thoroughly. Adjust sprinkler equipment for a larger water droplet size to help reduce evaporation. Frequent shallow watering causes plant roots to concentrate close to the surface, making the plant more susceptible to water fluctuations.

4. Loosen the soil surface and use mulches. Most mulches help to keep soil surfaces loose and receptive to water absorption.
5. Follow directions for operating and maintaining all irrigation systems. Check regularly for leaks, malfunctions, or worn parts.
6. Keep your garden well weeded to eliminate competition for water. Consider removing surplus plants from overcrowded beds to ease water demands.
7. Use wide rows with plants closer together, which reduces soil water evaporation.
8. Avoid watering during windy weather.
9. Water early in the morning when humidity is the highest for reduced evaporation.
10. Locate your garden away from trees which might compete for water.