

Questions on Compost and Mulch

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Compost and mulch are essential parts of successful gardening in the San Antonio Region. Compost is decomposing organic material that increases drainage, water-holding capability and nutrient efficiency in the soil.

Mulch insulates the soil, reducing the evaporation of moisture and keeping it cool. In addition, mulch reduces the number of weeds that germinate and compete with your plants for water and nutrients.

Here are some questions I have been fielding on compost and mulch. Consider the answers:

Q. What is the difference between mulch and compost?

A. Mulch is an insulating layer between the soil and the air. It can be organic or inorganic material. Compost is decomposed or decomposing organic material. Compost works well as a mulch but is probably more valuable as a soil additive. Incorporate two inches of compost into any planting area to improve plant performance or top dress lawn grass with compost after it has been aerated.

Q. What is the best mulch?

A. Use whatever mulch is available. It is required in large quantities so use whichever is most affordable. Leaves and grass clippings are free to most gardeners. Shredded brush is relatively inexpensive. Pine bark, cedar, and pecan shells are attractive but more expensive.

Q. How deep do we need to pile the mulch to do any good?

A. Mulch at any depth helps conserve water and prevent weeds. Use a fine mulch like live oak leaves, compost, cocoa shells, or pecan shells at one inch deep for seedlings or small transplants. Increase the depth to two inches as the plants increase in size. Trees and shrubs benefit by up to six inches of mulch in most situations.

Q. Is organic mulch better than inorganic mulch?

A. Organic mulch has the advantage that it decomposes with time and contributes to the health of the soil. Inorganic mulches such as decomposed granite, pebbles, brick, patio blocks, and even flagstone can serve double duty as a mulch and a patio or walkway surface. To serve as a mulch, the bricks and flagstone should be used without mortar. Plastic and weed barrier mulches have special uses.

Q. I always understood compost to be high in nitrogen. Why is it recommended that when we add compost to the garden each year we also add a high nitrogen lawn fertilizer?

A. Finished compost has some nitrogen but commercial compost usually includes sawdust or other low-nitrogen materials to make it go farther. As the organic materials decompose in your garden they can create a nitrogen deficit. The texture is great but the plants don't prosper because of the nitrogen deficit. Look for compost that is mostly composted and

supplement the nitrogen with 10 cups of lawn fertilizer per 100 sq. ft. of garden for best results.

Q. Why would we buy compost from horticultural suppliers when we can have our own compost pile?

A. It is recommended that you have an active compost pile to recycle garden waste, but it is difficult to make enough compost to provide adequate top dressing for the lawn and enough to incorporate two inches or more into the raised bed gardens every two or three years.

To get the job done most area gardeners must rely on purchases of commercial compost mixes as a supplement. The material is relatively inexpensive, available in large quantities, and can be delivered by the suppliers.

Q. Does mulch piled against the trunk of a tree do any good? I thought the feeder roots that took up water are out under the drip line?

A. You are correct that the feeder roots are concentrated out near and beyond the drip line of an established tree. To help the tree the mulch would need to be out there.

Mulch at the base of an established tree is decorative and keeps string mowers away from the trunk. If that is the purpose, place the mulch in a donut shape with the hole around the trunk.

Mulch over the area near the trunk is essential for newly planted trees. The mulch preserves moisture for use by the root ball. Such a mulch layer is useful for three to four years. Again, use a donut of mulch with no mulch against the trunk.

Q. Why do some gardeners say mulch is not an asset when it is dry?

A. Mulch will intercept a small amount of the initial rainfall after a dry period. Its impact on reducing evaporation results in an overwhelming positive net impact however in making water available to plants.