

One of the most common questions I get is how to control weeds in flowerbeds and vegetable gardens. In these areas, it is often difficult to use an herbicide to kill weeds because of the danger of spray unintentionally getting on desirable plants. People are also becoming leier of using pesticides in general. And so, in this situation using mulch is a great option. A mulch is something that physically covers the soil. Traditionally mulches we think of mulches as something like chunk, shredded bark or even grass clippings, but other materials are considered mulches also. These include, plastic sheeting, crushed stone and recycled materials such as rubber. To be effective, mulches should be applied 2-3 inches deep and should not be placed directly against tree trunks or plant stems. Not only do mulches suppress most weeds, but they are also great for water conservation.

Plant Based Mulches (chunk bark, shredded bark, ground tree limbs, etc.): These are inexpensive and offer a natural look for the landscape. They do slowly decompose and the color fades in the sun over time. They should be refreshed with an additional inch of mulch per year to alleviate this. However, the decomposition adds valuable organic matter to the soil. Dyed or stained shredded wood mulches are available that are colorfast for much longer periods of time than natural products. Various bark or wood mulches can be purchased bagged or in bulk from local garden centers and landscape product centers. Local green waste facilities also offer mulch relatively inexpensively but their mulches may not look as quite as “finished” as products from garden centers and landscape product businesses.

Plastic Sheeting: The main use for plastic sheeting is in vegetable gardens, where many gardeners plant their vegetables in black, UV resistant plastic sheeting. The reasons for this include water conservation. You use up to 50% less water using it, but is also does a great job of suppressing weeds. A disadvantage is that it is not recyclable and must be thrown away at the end of the season.

Rock Mulches: Rock mulches are becoming more popular and are available bagged or bulk options. They offer a wide spectrum of colors and are more permanent. Two to three inches must be applied to be effective. Some limitations of rock mulches include that they are much heavier than organic mulches - making them more difficult to handle - and often times more expensive up front.

Recycled Mulches: Many products made from recycled rubber are becoming popular. They offer a more natural look comparable to bark but are more permanent like rock. They are often used in play areas and on pathways. Darker colored versions may heat up more than bark products in the summer sun.

Compost: Composts are normally incorporated into the soil through tilling and consist of partially decomposed plant and/or animal matter such as manure. Many people like the dark color of many commercially available composts and use them as a mulch instead. This is fine with a few limitations. Due to compost consisting a finer particle, they break down faster than other mulches. They also can wash away on slopes and blow away in the wind.