



Mulching Requirements

Mulch is the simplest and most cost effective way to assist in the long term health of your garden. In simple terms hardwood mulch gives plants three basic functions; Water absorption, nutrients and protection. Mulch should be organic (Ground hardwood or Leaf litter); stone, gravel, rubber or any other synthetic mulch offers no horticultural benefits. Long term inorganic mulch is more costly, promotes weed growth and germination and is almost always does not stay in one location. We at Step of Green use and promote only two types of mulch, double ground hardwood (includes bark) and leaf mulch. Both offer excellent water retention abilities, as well both will decay over time and provide your landscape with the necessary nutrients. If placed at proper depths mulch will aid in protecting plants roots through the harsh winters of the Chicago area.

Types of Mulch

Inorganic- This will consist of stone, gravel, lava rock, shredded rubber, and many other dreamed up products. The only benefit is the products usually will retain their color for years to come. Down side is each will have to have an underlayment of plastic, double layer is preferred, as it will break down due to sun and weather exposure. Material will have to be placed in 3"-4" depths and will have to be retained by plastic, metal, stone or another fixed edge. Holes in plastic will have to be left for plantings. Cost of installation is very labor intensive and will need to be raked and/or replenished every year or so. Offers zero horticultural benefit to plants and the dark damp environment under the plastic will actually promote weed growth as they will access through planting holes.

Organic- This will consist of ground hardwood, bark, leaf litter, pine straw, shell husks (rare) and ground wood debris. Finding a good source for organic mulch is key, many suppliers will integrate wood debris from construction, old fences, doors, etc. into the mulch which may be full of inorganic material or contain chemically treated wood. It is best to always ask for double or even triple ground hardwood mulch, this is usually made from scraps from the lumber industry or from cut down virgin trees. This mulch will contain both shredded wood fibers, but also fines from the outer layers of the tree including bark. This combination adds in great water retention, nutrient breakdown and knits together to add a protection layer in colder climates.

Application

Initial application of hardwood mulch should be placed at a depth between 2"-3" not exceeding 4". After first year of installation new mulch can be added as necessary to maintain even distribution, but do not exceed 4" in depth, too much mulch or mulch piled high around the base of plants can cause long term health problems for the plants. Mulch does have a life span and should be removed and replaced every 3-4 years or be turned every season and have leaf mulch add to alleviate compaction. Plastic should never be placed under organic mulch as it only promotes weed growth and inhibits the plants from getting any of the horticultural benefits.