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Gardening - make the mulch of it!

What's one of the secrets to a healthy garden and lush lawn? Try mulch! You don't need a degree in horticulture or bags of store-bought products - good gardeners have been practising mulching for generations. Besides improving the health of soil, recycling grass clippings, leaves, and weeds into mulch also provides an answer to water shortages and overburdened landfills. Mulch is simply a layer of material, organic or inorganic, placed on or around plants, shrubs or trees to cover the soil.

Tips:

- Leave grass clippings on the lawn after mowing to add nutrients, reduce water loss, and eliminate the need for chemical fertilizers. Do not use grass which has been treated with hazardous pesticides or herbicides.
- Annuals, perennials and vegetable seedlings can benefit from a mulch which is moved aside at planting time and then pulled back around the plant as it grows.
- Don't mulch too closely around the trunks of trees (you'll smother the roots), or too closely at the base of heat-loving vegetables and flowers (mulches cool the soil). Mulch trees out to the drip line, which is the outer perimeter of the tree branches.
- Mulches can be an ideal hiding place for insects such as slugs and snails. Remove or turn mulch under during the spring to discourage egg-laying (follow up with biological controls available at garden centres).
- Mulch should be no deeper than 5-7.5 centimetres.(2-3 inches) to ensure circulation of air to soil.
 Don't mulch with weeds containing seeds or persistent roots.

Benefits of mulching:

- Water / moisture conservation acts as a sponge to hold water and nutrients close to the soil, and blocks the drying effects of sun and wind to reduce evaporation by more than 70 percent. This encourages healthy plant growth, prevents drying of shallow roots, and makes for less watering. Mulches also attract earthworms that will tunnel through soil providing aeration, which allows for improved water absorption.
- Weed control thick layers can reduce germination and growth of weeds, eliminating need for herbicides.
- Insulation stabilizes soil temperatures, keeping root zones cooler in summer and protects soil from heaving during winter temperature fluctuations. (Apply after ground has frozen.) By covering bare soil, mulch prevents soil compaction and erosion caused by heavy rains and wind.
- Soil enrichment replenishes and enriches the soil as it decomposes, reducing the need for compost, manure, and other fertilizers. Increased organic matter results in less digging, tilling, and cultivation. It improves the soil's fibre content; making sandy soil more water retentive and clay soil more porous; creating an ideal environment for earthworms and micro-organisms essential to healthy soil.
- Adaptable may be selected either for its rapid decomposition, its longevity, or a combination of both. Most natural or organic mulches gradually break down and decompose to add nutrients to the soil and improve texture and drainage. This is helpful in vegetable plots. In ornamental plantings of flowers, shrubs and trees, you may prefer a more decorative and long-lasting mulch.
- Garden maintenance by limiting direct contact with soil and preventing mud from splashing, mulches help keep fruits, flowers and vegetables clean and disease-free, and garden beds neat and attractive.

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