Choosing & Using Mulch

Using mulch is one of the best landscape practices available to conserve water and enhance the growth of landscape plants.

Mulch helps plants grow to be more attractive and resilient by stabilizing moisture and temperature levels, reducing evaporation in the upper layers of soil, and preventing new weeds from growing. The term mulch refers to any product placed on top of the soil surface to enhance landscape plant growth.

Use mulch any place in the landscape where you have bare soil in between plants. It's not necessary to mulch lawn areas or areas of solid vegetation.

Which mulch?

Most commercially available mulches fall into one of two categories: 1) wood products like wood chips, bark chips, shredded wood, or a mixture of wood and bark, or 2) rock products like gravel, pea gravel, decorative rock, and crushed gravel.

Choose the mulch that provides the most benefits for your landscape plants and maintenance level. Keep in mind you can use more than one kind of mulch in your landscape to provide more interest

Wood and bark products

Pros	Best for preventing new weeds in landscape
	Breakdown of mulch improves soil quality over time
	Keeps soil cooler and moister than rock mulches
Cons	Breakdown means it must be replenished every one to two years
	Lightweight materials may blow away

Rock and gravel products

Pros	Doesn't blow away in windy areas
	Doesn't require replenishment over time
	Retains heat well, some xeric plants prefer rock mulch
Cons	Requires regular weed control throughout the growing season
	Keeps soil warmer and drier than wood or bark products, but is better than bare soil.

How deep?

Wood and bark mulches around larger plants (trees and shrubs)	4 inches deep
Wood and bark mulches around smaller plants (flowers and groundcovers)	3 inches deep
Rock and gravel mulches around larger plants (trees and shrubs)	3 inches deep
Rock and gravel mulches around smaller plants (flowers and groundcovers)	2 inches deep

Mulches for challenging sites

Windy areas
- Use any type of rock, or shredded wood and bark mulches

Slopes
- Use angular rock, shredded wood or bark, or pine needles that won't roll downhill

Under trees
- Use a wood or bark mulch or pine needles, not rock or gravel products

Groundcovers
- Use mulches with smaller particle sizes, like fine wood chips, pea gravel or crushed gravel

Products to avoid

Despite being commercially available, there are several products that will not provide benefits to landscape plants.

1. Rubber mulch has been shown to leach potentially harmful chemicals into soil and be extremely flammable.
2. Mulches that mat down easily don't allow oxygen and water to move easily into the soil, which is required for healthy landscape plants.
3. Landscape fabric, for the most part, is problematic. Wood and bark mulches blow away much more easily when placed on top of landscape fabric. Furthermore, landscape fabric under rock and gravel mulches collects dust and debris over time, worsening weed problems.

Mulching in fire-prone areas

If your house is located in an area at risk for wildfire, use wood, bark, or pine needle mulches much further from your house. They are best used in peripheral areas of your property, but make sure they are limited to "island" areas separated by at least 10 feet of mowed grass or rock mulch rather than large, continuous swaths.

Regularly remove lower limbs of trees and shrubs to prevent burning mulches from igniting landscape plants.

Local sources for free mulch

City of Colorado Springs, City Forestry Operations Center

- 1601 Recreation Way, Colorado Springs
- springsgov.com

Black Forest Slash and Mulch Program

- Herring Road, one mile south of Shoup Rd., Black Forest
- bfslash.org

Learn more: Call **668-4555** or visit us online at **csu.org.**