

October 17, 2018



Using Mulch versus Compost in your Garden
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For many new gardeners - the terms mulch and compost can be confusing. Often, the terms will be used inter-changeably. What is the difference between these two materials and where to use them? Not knowing the difference between mulch and compost can determine whether you have a successful garden or a failed garden.

Mulch is anything that is used on top of soil as a protective cover for the purpose of preventing weed growth and retain moisture in the soil. One common mulch is the wood chip or nugget variety which can be made from raw wood, construction debris, wood scraps, or recycled wood pallets. This mulch is available commercially and sometimes for free!

Colored mulch is made from recycled wood from many sources and is safe to use around plants. These wood chips will usually retain their color for about a year and will break down in about two years. Recycled wood is much dryer than raw wood chips and accepts colored dyes readily. This gives the mulch a more consistent color for decorative purposes and makes it more appealing to gardeners. The dyes used in colored wood mulch are usually vegetable-based that will not harm your plants, pets, or family.

Raw wood chips is wood from local tree trimming and tree cutting services. These chips are preferable since they usually come from trees cut in your area and you can often obtain these for free by asking the tree contractor to dump the chips in your yard. Raw wood chips will begin to break down in about two years and finish in about four years.

One caution with using raw wood chips is the micro-organisms that break down the wood consume large amounts of nitrogen. Since raw wood chips contain very little nitrogen, the micro-organisms must take the nitrogen from the underlying soil in order to survive. To avoid nitrogen

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deficiency in your garden, raw wood chips should never be used in vegetable gardens or around new plantings. Finally, sawdust is neither mulch nor compost. In the process of breaking down, sawdust will draw large amounts of nitrogen from the soil and also acts as an incubator for plant diseases.

Compost is a soil amendment in which organic matter has decomposed into smaller particles. Home gardeners can easily make compost from grass clippings, tree clippings, plant debris, straw, fruit, coffee grounds, tea bags, eggshells, or other organic materials that have been allowed to decompose naturally through the action of heat, air, water and micro-organisms before they are added to the soil.

Diseased plants should never be used in compost piles as they will just spread the disease to the rest of the pile. You can also buy compost from most garden supply stores. Compost enriches the soil, helps retain moisture, suppress plant diseases and pests, and reduces the need for chemical fertilizers. Compost adds vital nutrients such as nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium to the soil. Composted organic matter allows heavy soils to hold water and resist compaction. By improving soil structure, compost allows room for air, water, and energy to move freely through the plant. Compost should always be used in raised beds. If adding decorative mulch to ornamental plants, compost goes in the soil first.

Composting/mulching will be amongst the many tasks covered in “Putting Your Garden to Bed” on Saturday, October 20. The topic is large but the extra efforts expended this fall will pay big dividends next spring. Class will run 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. at the Sherwood Demonstration Garden. Admission is free, on-campus parking is \$2.

UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. to noon, by calling [\(530\) 621-5512](tel:5306215512). Walk-ins are welcome at our office, located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. Visit us at the Sherwood Demonstration Garden, located at 6699 Campus Drive in Placerville, behind Folsom Lake College – El Dorado Center. The garden is open through October, Fridays and Saturdays, 9:00 a.m. to noon.

For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County website at <http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu>. Sign up to receive our online notices and e-newsletter at http://ucanr.edu/master_gardener_e-news. You can also find us on Facebook.