Mulch is defined as any material spread on the garden to protect root plants from heat, cold or drought, to reduce problems with weeds, and to keep fruit clean.

Although inorganic materials such as clear plastic and black plastic can be used, organic mulches are by far the most common. Organic mulches are derived from natural materials that were once alive; their decomposition adds “humus” to the soil, helping it retain water and nutrients.

For newly planted trees and shrubs, spread mulch evenly underneath the plant about three inches deep. For trees and shrubs that have been in place a long time, a two-inch layer is generally sufficient. Caution: When mulching around trees, do not pile mulch up against the tree trunk.

ORGANIC MULCHES

SHREDDED LEAVES: Decompose quickly, improve soil, of no cost to the gardener.

BARK: Made from the by-products of logs. Most common are shredded bark and bark chunks. These mulches resist compaction, are attractive, will not blow away.

WOOD CHIPS: Made from trees and shrubs, are attractive, stay in place, come in a variety of colors.

CEDAR CHIPS: Very popular, but the harvesting of cedar trees is often done at the expense of dwindling wildlife habitat.

SAWDUST: A poor choice for the following reasons: weed seeds easily sprout in it; tends to cake making it harder for water to soak into the ground, robs nitrogen from the soil as it decomposes requiring the addition of more fertilizer.

STRAW: A good mulch for large gardens. Inexpensive, suppresses weeds, conserves moisture, and insulates well. May contain crop seeds or growth-retarding chemicals. It is important to use straw rather than hay since hay contains many seed seeds.
PINE NEEDLES: Attractive, decomposes slowly, resists compaction, easy to work with and free if you have pine trees on your property. They tend to wash away in a rainstorm.

NEWSPAPER: Three or more layers of newspaper can effectively keep down weeds. To keep paper from blowing away, weigh it down using a shovel-full of soil or other means. Shredded newspaper will also work well but it tends to blow around.