



A39 Mulching plants



Mulching is spreading materials over the soil surface, such as compost. The benefits are readily seen, particularly during summer holidays when it conserves soil moisture and suppresses weeds. Mulching is an important activity for an organic school garden and well worth budgeting time and materials to do properly. This activity shows how to choose the most appropriate mulch, how much and when to use.

Resources

- Plants to mulch, eg fruit, vegetables, herbs
- Mulching materials (see next page)
- Tools including wheelbarrows, shovel, spade, fork, gloves, trowel, hand fork, watering can/hose.

Activity

- 1 Select plants that would benefit from mulching, eg fruit trees and bushes, crops that particularly dislike interruptions to growth, such as cabbage, leaf beet, potato, runner bean, sweetcorn, etc. See Food Growing Instruction Cards.
- 2 Follow instructions on the next page for selecting the most appropriate material, when to apply and how much to use.
- 3 Always leave a 15cm diameter gap around stems or trunks to prevent 'collar' rot and deter voles and mice from chewing bark.
- 4 Remove mulch in autumn if not decomposed, eg straw, grass clippings. This clears away fungal disease spores and gives access for birds to eat overwintering pests in the soil, eg gooseberry sawfly cocoons.



Always mulch moist soil, watering first if needed. This way soil stays wetter for longer.

See A14 about using mulches to clear ground of weeds and grass.

Health & Safety	Follow Manual Handling guidelines (SG1.3) when moving heavy bags and wheelbarrows full of mulch and spreading materials around plants. Mind your head if spreading mulch around low tree branches. <i>See also Health and Safety Guidelines (Section SG1.2)</i>
Further information	A14 Clearing weeds and grass A16 Building a garden path S4.3 Using mulches G4.4 Using green manures (as living mulches)

Summary table for mulching plants

Note: mulch in late spring for most crops. Any earlier will keep soil colder for longer at a time when plants roots need warmth to grow, delaying flowering/growth. Any later and soil will be drier and some benefits of mulching lost.

Material	Conserves moisture	Controls weeds	Feeds soil	How much	When to do it
Compost	Yes	Very little	Balanced nutrients. Also improves soil.	Wheelbarrow per 5m ² .	Late spring or summer.
Well-rotted manure	Yes	Very little	Balanced nutrients, especially high in nitrogen, good for leafy crops. Also improves soil.	Wheelbarrow per 10m ² .	Late spring or summer.
Leafmould	Yes	Little	Low. Also improves soil.	2-3cm deep layer.	Any time, including autumn without risk of nutrients leaching.
Straw	Yes	Yes	High in potassium that helps fruit growth.	Up to 10cm thick. The pale colour reflects light so fruit above ripens quicker.	Late spring or summer.
Newspaper	Yes	Yes	Improves soil a little.	At least six sheets, made damp, weighed down.	Late spring or summer. Any time for weed clearance (A14).
Cardboard	Yes	Yes	Improves soil a little.	One or two layers, weighed down. Remove any sticky tape.	Late spring or summer. Any time for weed clearance (A14).
Water-permeable membrane	Yes	Yes	No	Single layer under permanent planting, weighed down.	At planting. Any time for weed clearance (A14). See also A16 for use in making paths.
Plastic sheets	Yes	Yes	No	Single layer, weighed down.	Any time for weed clearance (A14).
Comfrey leaves	Yes	Yes	Balanced nutrients, high in potassium that helps fruit growth.	Up to 10cm thick.	Late spring or summer.
Grass clippings	Yes	Yes	High in nitrogen, good for leafy crops.	3-5cm thick.	Late spring or summer.
Gravel	Yes	Yes	No	2.5cm thick, eg around permanent planting such as herbs.	Late spring or summer. See also A16 for use in making paths.

Summary table for mulching plants (continued)

Material	Conserves moisture	Controls weeds	Feeds soil	How much	When to do it
Bark chips	Yes	Yes	Low	5cm deep layer around permanent planting.	Late spring or summer. See also A16 for use in making paths.
Composted wood chips (compost for at least six months)	Yes	Yes	Low. Don't use chippings around plants without composting first as they will rob soil of nitrogen.	2-3cm deep layer.	Late spring or summer. See also A16 for use in making paths.



Mulching with comfrey leaves.



Mulching with grass clippings.



Mulching with compost.



Mulching with straw.



Mulching with newspaper.



Mulching newly planted tree with compost.