



## GARDENING TIPS FROM BLUE WILLOW AND LANDSCAPE ONTARIO

MAY

### *The Magic of Mulches*

There is no magic bullet when it comes to low maintenance gardening, but using mulch comes close!

Mulch is a protective layer of material spread on top of the soil. This layer helps to:

- conserve moisture in the soil
- prevent weed growth
- protect the sides of houses from mud splatters
- protect plant roots by moderating soil temperature
- keep mud and soil off feet when working in the garden
- provide a clean finished look
- organic mulches gradually break down and improve soil structure



Mulches can be either organic bark chips, cocoa bean hulls, leaves, compost, grass clippings or pine needles or inorganic, such as stone, landscape fabric or plastic. All organic mulches gradually decompose and return beneficial organic matter to your garden. Inorganic mulches are more permanent and should be applied after all planting is complete, as it can be awkward to install new plants once a layer of stones has been spread on the garden.

### *Types of Organic Mulch*

**Bark chips:** available in large or small chips and shredded, also comes in different colours.

**Cocoa bean hulls:** smell heavenly when first applied. They are light and airy, but will pack down with rain or irrigation.

**Leaves:** nature's compost. For the best results you should chop your leaves up by running over them with your lawn mower before raking them up and putting them on your beds.

**Compost:** if you have a back yard composter, the well-seasoned compost can be applied as a mulch.

**Pine needles:** rhododendrons and azaleas love an acidic mulch of pine needles.



**Grass clippings:** most lawn mowers mulch grass clippings into small bits that are meant to be dropped back on the lawn to decompose naturally. If you still have a mower that collects clippings, a thin layer can be spread on the garden as mulch, but it can get smelly in the heat of summer.

### **Types of Inorganic Mulch**

**Stone:** depending on the style and colour of your house, you can use river pebbles, larger potato stone, gravel or brick chips.

**Landscape fabric:** a porous fabric that is placed on the bed before the plants are installed. Xs are cut in the fabric to put the plants through. Usually another type of mulch is layered on top of the fabric to hide it.

**Plastic:** used mainly with vegetable gardens to help heat the soil more quickly in spring and reduce weed growth. Plants are placed in holes cut in the plastic.

It's easy to apply mulch just remove any large weeds in the bed before you start and spread a layer two to four inches deep over the soil around your plants. Keep the mulch away from direct contact with plants an inch or two of space will help prevent disease growth and stem rot.

If you're mulching this spring, apply now, before your plants get too big. Temporarily inverting old plant pots over your smaller plants will help protect them while you are shoveling mulch around. Once the ground has frozen next fall, a layer of mulch will help prevent the soil from freezing and thawing, which can heave plants out of the ground. Evergreen boughs (cut from your Christmas tree) placed over your dormant perennial garden can also act as insulation for the winter. Don't forget to remove the boughs in spring before the plants start to sprout!

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