

Mulching

As people like to sleep covered up, so do plants. As your plants go through their winter sleep, keep them covered up for best results. A two to four inch mulch around plants reduces water loss, prevents weeds and keeps soil temperatures warmer in the winter. Many types of mulch will work – pine straw, leaves, pine bark or ground up landscape trimmings. Grass clippings are not recommended as they may pack too tightly and not allow air into the soil.

Many people use landscape fabrics under mulch. Fabrics are synthetic woven materials that are placed on the ground. These fabrics prevent many weeds from coming up. They do have some drawbacks. Some fabrics are solid plastic. Do not use these. Use the woven plastics. Solid plastic fabric barriers prevent water from entering and leaving the soil. Fabric mulches also make the soil wetter than usual. The only thing worse than dry soil is overly wet soil. Roots of plants in wet locations die and the plants decline. Do not use landscape fabrics on wet sites. Weed fabrics are best used in dry locations with raised beds.

Another problem with landscape fabric is that it is unsightly and must be covered. If the fabrics are covered with leaves or pine straw, these mulches eventually rot. This leaves a residue on top of the fabric in which weed seeds germinate and grow. Then you have weeds in spite of the fabric. One way to slow this process is to use a mulch that decomposes slowly on top of the fabric. Put pine bark or hardwood mulch over landscape fabric. Avoid using pine straw or leaves in this situation.

Some gardeners use rock for mulch. This can be effective, especially used over landscape fabric. The problem is that rock can get very hot or create lots of glare in the summer. Rock can also get into the lawn where mowers will hit it. I do not recommend rock as mulch in most situations. The exception may be in a shady, well-drained spot where there is little chance of rocks getting into the grass.

Sometimes we need to cover plants that are growing above ground in pots. This is very important since the potted plants' roots are not protected in the ground and are more susceptible to temperature changes. Also, the plants' roots are mostly at the sides of the pot where temperatures change very quickly. Move the potted plants to a warmer site or bury them in the ground to protect them. If you want to plant them in the ground anyway, do so now. Winter is a good time to plant shrubs, trees and perennials.

If you have several potted plants, you can put their pots so close together that they touch and then pile soil or leaves around them. Do not leave potted plants in the soil longer than a few weeks or so since they will make roots through the holes in the pot. These roots will be broken off when you pull the plant up to move it.

Covering plants with a sheet or blanket does not work well. Unlike us, they produce little heat to keep themselves warm. Plant covers work better for plants near the ground since you can trap the heat from the soil. Be careful to tuck the edge of the edge under the soil or something else to keep it down. Pulling the covers up on your plants requires thought, planning and effort.