

## Time to Mulch

Mulch can improve the appearance and living environment of any yard any time; but spring is the traditional time to mulch – with the occasional touch up in the fall. Mulch consists of some type of fiber ground into a spreadable consistency and either left in its natural color or dyed. Several mulch alternatives may also be considered and will be discussed later in this paper.

**Composition.** Mulch is generally made from fiber, root, bark and/or twigs and leaves of trees and bushes. Natural mulches are made from fresh materials. Basic hard woods will create a medium brown natural colored mulch. Hardwood mulches are good for the environment meaning that they will naturally degrade and disappear into the soil adding nothing worrisome to the environment. Root and bark mulches will be darker brown than hardwood and hold their color longer. Root / bark mulches are richer in nutrients than hardwood and will actually improve the soil quality as they degrade.

In place of or in addition to fresh fiber, dyed mulches frequently incorporate “waste wood,” that is, old pallets, left over construction wood, etc. These previously used woods may introduce elements into the mulch than can cause problems. This is not always the case, but is more likely when raw materials are from a potentially unknown origin before becoming mulch. Fungus, spores, termites have all been attributed to mulch made from reused materials.

Playground mulch is made to specific standards to ensure a safe play area. Schools, townships, and other public entities must use playground mulch which is certified not to splinter or stain. Certification also covers the assurance that at specified depths, the mulch will break falls. Although certification is not required for home use, using certified playground mulch for home play areas is the smart choice.

**Manufacturing.** The process for manufacturing mulch includes grinding, regrinding, separating, and coloring.

Grinding occurs up to three times depending on how fine the end product needs to be. The finer the mulch the more quickly the mulch will degrade. The

separating process uses magnets to remove anything that got into the raw material that doesn't belong, e.g., nails in pallets. The coloring process adds dye to the raw materials to create a more permanent color consistency. Dyes may be natural or artificial. Natural dyed mulch made from fresh fibers is the safest, most consistent and generally highest quality dyed mulch.

**Packaging.** Mulches may be sold in either bulk or bag. Bulk mulches are sold by the cubic yard and loaded at the supplier's yard into a truck, either your truck or the supplier's. The truck then takes the mulch to your property and dumps it in a pile. Bagged mulches are sold in either 2 or 3 cubic foot bags. Nine 3 cubic foot bags equals one cubic yard. Many exotic mulches are not sold in bulk. The most common mulches are sold in both forms. A large quantity of bags will always cost more than the same quantity in bulk due to the cost of packaging.

**End Products.** The most common mulches resulting from the above origins and manufacturing process are: Hardwood, Root / Bark, Black Dyed, Brown Dyed, Red Dyed, and Playground. Other options include Wood Chips / Nuggets, Pine Bark, Cedar, Cypress, Cocoa Bark, Licorice Root. Every garden center and landscape supplier has slightly different selections of mulches, packaging, and delivery options. Be sure to discuss your needs prior to making your final selection.

**Installation.** Mulch can simply be spread over dirt to provide a ground cover. However, covering the ground with a weed barrier first will avoid the growth of large, deep seated weeds. Weed barrier fabric will not prevent weed growth from plant seeds that blow into the mulch area. But these shallow rooted weeds that latch onto the surface are much easier to pull out than the deep ones that the fabric suffocates. Various weed killers may also be sprayed on the mulch to prevent weed growth depending on what type of plants are desired to survive.

The first time a garden area is mulched, 3-4 inches are recommended to create a solid base. In subsequent years, 2 inches is generally adequate. For playground areas, the depth of the mulch is calculated based on the height of potential falls that are being buffered. A play area would have less demands, for example, than a swing set. Charts exist to recommend specific amounts for specific needs. For general play areas, 6 inches is common.

**Other Options.** Instead of classic fiber based mulches, homeowners may opt for natural stone pebbles or rubber mulch. Rubber mulch appeared a few years ago

as a way to repurpose old tires. Rubber mulch is shredded and dyed a large number of bright and cheery colors. The problem with rubber mulch is that it never degrades. If you get tired of it, you have to dig it up and find someplace that will accept it for disposal. Natural stone pebbles present a huge range of optional sizes, colors and textures. Weed barrier has the double duty of both stopping deep weed growth but also keeping the decorative stone from sinking into the ground and disappearing over time. The good news, is that when you get tired of stone, you can let it disappear into the environment safely. Stone is a natural product which will not hurt the environment and which will eventually degrade.