

#4: Mulch

KEEP MOISTURE IN THE SOIL, HELP CONTROL WEEDS,
AND REDUCE STORMWATER RUNOFF

A mulch layer around trees, shrubs, and planted beds provides many benefits. In areas that are difficult to mow, irrigate, or otherwise maintain, use mulch to replace turf or groundcovers. Also consider placing mulch in shady areas where many plants don't grow well.

THE DIRT ON MULCH

Mulch is a wonderful addition to any landscape, because it:

- **Buffers soil temperature.** Mulch keeps soils and plant roots warmer in winter and cooler in summer.
- **Helps maintain soil moisture.** Mulch slows evaporation and reduces the water needs of plants.



Properly applied mulch encourages moisture retention and accents the landscape.

- **Inhibits weed germination and growth.**
- **Adds beauty.** Mulch gives planting beds a neat and uniform appearance, and its color and texture can complement plantings.
- **Helps reduce soil erosion.**
- **Can improve soil.** Careful planning and management can help gradually build soil organic matter to sufficient levels. Adding new organic matter to soil every year (by spreading a thin layer of compost on top of grass) is perhaps the most effective way to improve and build soil organic matter in established lawns.
- **Can protect plants.** Mulch can help prevent certain plant diseases, and when placed around shrubs and trees (at least 12 to 18 inches from the trunk), it reduces the likelihood of damage from trimmers and mowers.

CHOOSING A MULCH

There are many factors to consider when selecting mulch for your landscape. Depending on your priorities, you could make a decision based on any or all of them:

- Cost
- Color
- Origins of the mulch
- Durability
- Nutrient content
- Texture/Appearance

All of the different kinds of mulch available in Florida have benefits and drawbacks. Cypress, melaleuca, and pine bark are the longest lasting types of mulch but don't offer plants many nutrients when they break down. Soil pH may be reduced by pine bark and pine straw, which would be excellent for acid-loving plants like azaleas, but not plants that require high-pH soil. Here's an overview of the most popular mulches:

Pine bark is a byproduct of the forest industry. It comes in ground and nugget forms, and has a rich brown color.

Pine straw (pine needles) comes from pine plantations, which produce paper and wood products, and is sold in bales. Unlike some mulches, pine needles are not likely to wash away, because they knit together.

Fallen leaves (including grass clippings) can be raked up for free in your landscape. This type of mulch is high in nutrients, but decomposes quickly.

Melaleuca mulch is made from the invasive exotic trees. The product is cured at a high temperature to kill seeds.

Mixed hardwood mulch is produced from scrap lumber, recycled pallets, or tree stems that are too small to be used for paper or wood production.

Eucalyptus mulch typically comes from plantations in South and Central Florida where the trees are grown specifically for mulch. They grow quickly so this mulch is considered renewable.

Utility mulch is sold or given away for free by many utility companies. This mulch comes from trimming trees and

other plants that get in the way of power lines, but it can come with weed seeds.

Cypress mulch is composed of both wood and bark. Cypress trees, which grow in Florida's forested wetlands, are often harvested for lumber used in fencing, flooring, furniture and other wood products. Cypress mulch is often made from the waste wood generated in the manufacture of these products, but it may also be produced from whole trees cut from wetlands. The Florida-Friendly Landscaping™ Program does not recommend the use of cypress mulch, as its origins may be difficult to determine.

Gravel or pebbles can be used as mulch, but they won't contribute to the soil's nutrient and organic content or water-holding capacity. If you choose to use these products, make sure to first install a woven ground cloth to keep them from sinking in sandy soils. These mulches last a long time, but will need to be cleared of debris to look their best.

GUIDELINES FOR USING MULCH

Follow these tips when using mulch in your landscape:

- **Maintain a 2- to 3-inch layer** around established trees, shrubs, and bedding plants. Coarse materials, such as pine nuggets, may be applied to a depth of 4 inches, but don't allow mulch to accumulate to a greater depth. Adding more mulch can harm plants because mulch intercepts rain and irrigation meant for plants' root systems.
- **Do not mulch to the curb, sidewalk, or water's edge.** Organic mulches eventually degrade and release their nutrients. They may also wash away and get into storm

drains or water bodies. This can be especially severe on sloped areas. A 3 to 4 foot buffer of turf or other dense ground cover is preferred on the downhill side of the mulched area. Coarse stones or gravel that will not wash away may also be used along impervious areas.

- **Avoid "volcano mulching."** When mulch is piled against the base of a tree, it holds moisture, encouraging rot in the trunk. Mulch piled against the trunks of young trees may also create habitat for rodents that chew the tender bark and can ultimately kill the trees.
- **Cover sides of the root ball with mulch.** Provide a 3-inch-deep layer of mulch around the tree. Generally, a 2 to 3 foot diameter circle of mulch per inch of tree trunk caliper will give adequate mulch area for newly planted trees. A thin (1 inch) layer of mulch can be placed over the root ball for aesthetic reasons, but deep layers on the root ball can prevent adequate irrigation and rain from reaching roots. Keep mulch about 12 to 18 inches from the trunk for any size of tree. Keep turf as far away from the trunk as possible with mulch or herbicides to aid tree establishment, to prevent mower damage to the trunk, and to prevent soil compaction.
- **Rake old mulch.** Some mulches can become matted, preventing water and air from seeping through. Rake it to benefit plantings and refresh the mulch's appearance.

HOW MUCH MULCH?

Purchasing mulch by the bag is convenient, but it can be costly. Buying mulch in bulk quantities can save you money. Bulk mulch is sold by the cubic yard; each cubic yard contains 27 cubic feet. Remember to apply 3 to 4 inches of mulch for a layer that will be 2 to 3 inches when settled. One cubic foot will cover 4 square feet to a depth of 3 inches.