

An Often Neglected Golden Rule for the Rose Garden

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Everyone knows that in order to have gorgeous, healthy gardens, there are a few rules to follow. Many, many books explain preparing and improving your beds, designing and choosing your roses, fertilizing, pruning, or spraying (or not spraying) your roses. But one of the main Golden Rules is often over-looked – mulching. Some would argue that you can prepare the perfect soil. Choose the perfect roses. Set up the perfect watering system, but without correctly applied mulch, your roses will not be perfect.

What is mulch? Mulch, simply, is a protective ground covering that saves water, reduces evaporation, prevents erosion, controls weeds, stabilizes soil temperature, prevents soil compaction, and in the case of an organic mulch, will enrich the soil. It almost sounds too good to be true. It's easily doable, but you must consider your garden and its needs.

There are two basic types of mulch – organic and inorganic. Organic is made of natural substances such as compost, bark, wood chips, leaves, pine needles, or grass. Inorganic mulches such as gravel, pebbles, black plastic and landscape fabric does not break down nor add nutrients to the soil. Both can add curb appeal.

Different types of mulch:

Organic

- Compost: This makes excellent mulch. Use your own or buy it. Be careful it does not contain weed seeds. It is already partially decomposed so it will have to be reapplied often. The dark color is very attractive.
- Bark: This is the most popular mulch and is widely available. Hardwood mulch is slower to break down. Pine is the most common, but cypress and redwood are popular. Cypress resists floating away in heavy rains.
- Chipper debris: A mixture of shredded bark, wood chips and leaves from tree-trimming operations. Many municipalities offer it free to residents. It is non-uniform so it may have an undesirable rustic appearance, will have floaters and may create a nitrogen deficiency if it has not been properly aged.
- Leaves: Readily available and inexpensive, but must be shredded. Non-shredded large leaves tend to either blow away or form a mat that does not let water move through it. Shred the leaves too fine and the same impenetrable mat forms.
- Pine needles: This is great mulch, especially for acid-loving plants. It allows air, water and nutrients to penetrate easily in the soil surface. Slow to decompose, but is a potential fire hazard. It does not insulate the soil as well as other mulches.
- Grass: When wet it forms a tightly woven mat. Grass probably is better in the compost pile or left on the lawn as thatch to break down and add nutrients.



Cypress mulch

Chipper bark mulch

Compost mulch

Non-organic mulches

- Gravel, Pebbles & Crushed Stones: One inch of gravel will provide weed control. Be careful, the rocks may add alkaline elements and reflect solar radiation which can create an even hotter environment during the summer months (especially with bright white rocks).
- Landscape cloth: The material allows air and water to move through it, but the curb appeal is not great unless organic mulch is placed on top.
- Rubber mulch: At this time, it is **not** recommended. How much of the chemicals in the shredded tires leach into the soil are not known and it can be a fire hazard.

What to consider when buying and applying mulch.

- Your pocketbook and the look you want to achieve. Consider dyed mulch. It may look wonderful, but if it is black or a very dark color it may absorb heat into the soil which the roots do not like. Mulch should be a curb appeal part of your landscape and the size and texture should be considered. Whether the roses are large or small or mass planted or spaced apart, mulch will add beauty to your rose bed.
- Is coarse or fine mulch better? If the mulch is more than 1 inch in diameter it will not pack tightly enough to keep out weed seeds carried by the wind.
- When should mulch be applied? Right after you plant!! If you use mulch that decomposes very fast you will have to replenish periodically. Best to check your mulch in March when you are pruning your roses. Then in June, when the heat gets very hot, and build it up in the fall for the colder winter months.
- How to apply your mulch. Before applying, weed the area. Mulch should be applied evenly, and pulled back from a tree trunk 3 or 4 inches and at least an inch from plant stems. Hilling up a big pile of mulch can endanger the life of a tree trunk or rose stems. Moist mulch against the stems will be ideal for a host of insects and disease problems. It will also make the stems soft and vulnerable. So leave a space for the air to circulate around the stems.
- How thick should the mulch be? If too thick, the mulch can absorb most of the rain or overhead irrigation water so not much reaches the roots. It can also provide a perfect environment for insects and even rodents. If too thin, the water will evaporate from the soil or run off and the soil will be too hot in summer and too cold in winter. Here is a rule of thumb. Most organic mulch should be from 2 ½ to 3 inches thick. Coarse-textured mulches such as pine bark nuggets allow good air movement through them

and can be 4 inches thick. Shredded leaves should never be thicker than 2 inches to keep them from matting. Remember you want to limit the water evaporation and keep the soil cooler in summer and warmer in winter. Protected roots grow healthy plants.

A few more facts to consider about mulch.

- Mulched plants have more roots than plants that are not mulched because mulched plants will produce additional roots in the mulch that surrounds them.
- Mulch prevents crusting of the soil surface, thus improving the absorption and movement of water into the soil.
- Mulches prevent soil splashing, which not only stops erosion but keeps soil-borne diseases from splashing up onto the plants.
- Heat causes mulch to decompose more rapidly. So plan to check the depth of your mulch more often during this record breaking summer.
- The research indicates garden mulch has little to no impact on the ph soil level.
- Research at Texas A&M University states that correctly applied mulch can cut your water bill in half.
- Waste wood materials such as used pallets and other wood pieces are shredded, dyed to match pine, hardwood, cypress or any other mulch product on the market and sold as mulch. Be aware that the trash wood may have unwanted chemicals in it and may also rob your soil of nitrogen.

Mulching reduces maintenance, but most of all it saves water, keeps the roses and other plants in your garden healthy and you wealthy and wise.

