

# **NATURAL MULCHES – UNLIMITED RICHES ARE IN YOUR YARD**

## **Why Not Turn Over a New (Old) Leaf?**

Fallen leaves carry 50 – 80% of the nutrients a tree extracts from the soil and air, including carbon, potassium, phosphorus, and other elements. These nutrients and elements are essential for plant growth.

What can be done with leaves? There are many options available. Here are five simple, earth-friendly ways to use your leaves – and enhance your soils:

1. Compost your leaves. Mix leaves (50%) with grass clippings (25%) and soil (25%). Add sufficient water to maintain a compost pile as wet as a wrung out sponge.
2. Bag extra dry leaves to save for use in your compost pile during spring and summer.
3. In the fall, spread leaves over the vegetable garden or flower bed (sheet composting). Leaves may be chopped and partially mixed with garden soil to speed decomposition. In the spring, at least a month prior to planting, dig in (or remove) any leaves that have not decomposed. These leftover leaves can be recycled under shrubs or trees to help reduce weeds.
4. Use leaves as a mulch around your ornamental plants, bushes, and trees. Mulch maintains moisture, suppresses weeds, and adds tilth to your soil.
5. Let leaves lie where they fall and mow them into the lawn. Shredded leaves nourish the soil and do not harm the lawn.

When leaves fall to the ground, they are naturally broken down by earthworms and microorganisms. Humus (similar to compost) is the end result of the decomposition process. Humus is light and fluffy, and improves the structure of sandy and clay soils.

## **Why Mulch?**

Here are some reasons to recycle shredded yard waste materials as mulch:

- To reduce the need for watering and weeding.
- To reduce soil compaction.
- To stabilize soil temperature.
- To hold moisture in the soil, while allowing rainfall to pass through.
- To enrich your soil through the gradual decomposition of natural yard materials.
- To increase yield and hasten maturity of plants such as tomatoes and peppers.
- To keep soil warm during the winter.
- To help control insects and diseases.

Mulch should be applied thick enough to inhibit weeds without depriving soil of water and oxygen.

A good mulch is readily available, inexpensive, and easy to apply. A good mulch fits your needs, yard materials and landscape. Why not try different natural mulches and help reduce the yard waste sent to landfills?

## Select the Natural Mulch that Fits with Your Landscape

**Shredded leaves:** Chop or shred leaves with a mower or shredder since whole leaves may mat and prevent water from reaching the soil. Leaves help cool soil during the summer and warm soil in the winter. Leaves raked into a shrub border will gradually break down and help nourish the soil.

**Grass clippings:** Spread dry clippings in a one-inch layer under bushes or around plants. Keep clippings away from young seedlings. Avoid clippings with a herbicide residue or clippings with weed seeds. In a vegetable garden, try laying grass clippings on top of wet newspaper to help resist weeds. Both the newspaper and the clippings will eventually decompose and help build the soil.

**Pine needles:** Use pine needles around acid-loving plants such as rhododendrons and azaleas. Pine needles help form the same rich mat of humus that nourishes trees in the forest.

**Compost:** Compost can be placed around plants as a mulch, especially to hold moisture and enrich soil. Apply in 1- 3 inch layers.

**Hay or straw:** Hay and straw are useful mulches in the vegetable garden, provided that rodents are not a problem. Since hay contains many seeds, straw is often preferred.

**Shredded bark or wood chips:** Spread in a thick layer around shrubs and trees to be effective as a weed control measure. Shredded cypress or pine bark, nugget pine bark, or wood chips are useful options.

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