

Mulches, natural water keepers

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Mulch is a layer of material added to bare soil and around plants. It is one of the simplest and cheapest climate actions you can do in your garden or community space.

How mulches help

Mulch is often used to stop weeds and for decoration, but throughout the year it also keeps soil moist which is great for plants.

When it rains the gaps in a loose mulch slow the water down, letting it soak in and stopping it from running off.

When it is hot, mulch stops the soil from drying out through evaporation. This also stops a crust forming; a hard crust stops water from being absorbed by the soil and means it runs off.



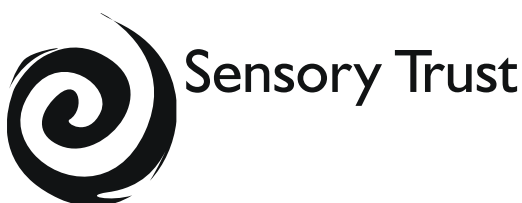
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Top tips for mulching

- Make sure the soil is moist before you cover it with mulch; water it first if the soil is dry.
- It's best if the soil is weed-free, although this is more important for perennial weeds because they will grow through the mulch.
- Add a layer of mulch to a depth of at least 5cm. It can be deeper but usually doesn't need to be.
- Leave a small gap around the trunk or stem of trees or shrubs and spread the mulch out to at least as wide as the canopy.
- Check the mulch from time to time to see if it needs topping up.
- Try different types of mulch to find the ones that work best for your space.



Possible materials for mulch

Bark and wood chippings

Pros: Long-lasting and attractive. Easy to source from garden centres. Possible DIY option using a wood chipper.

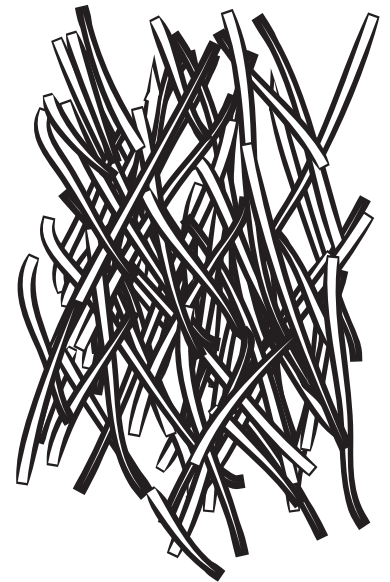
Cons: Not the cheapest option. Can lock up nitrogen, reducing fertility temporarily. Using aged bark will limit this.



Strulch (product made from wheat straw and iron minerals)

Pros: Light and easy-to-use, bought in bags. Will work into the soil and improve fertility and structure.

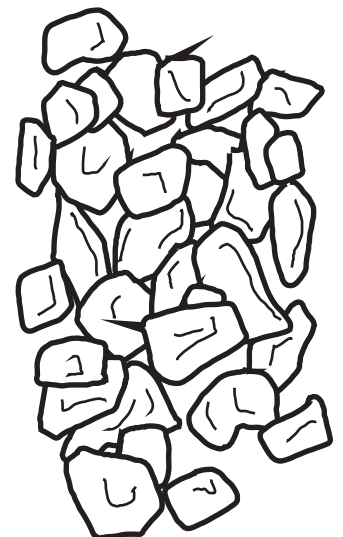
Cons: Not the cheapest option and will need topping up over time.



Gravel or pebbles

Pros: Long-lasting mulch, needs topping up less often. Neat, orderly appearance (often used in a Mediterranean or dry-garden planting style).

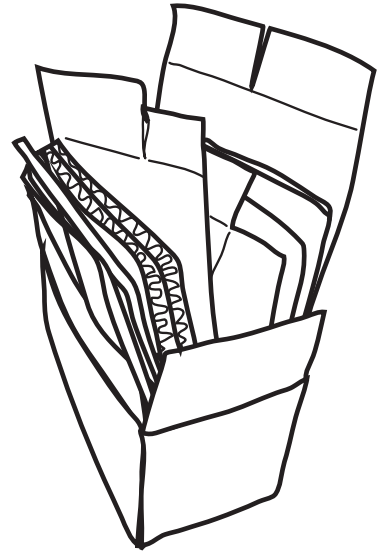
Cons: Not a cheap option. Can need a fabric underlay to keep it above the soil. Doesn't add to the soil's fertility and structure.



Cardboard

Pros: A good way to use waste material.

Cons: Not long-lasting, needs topping up. Wet cardboard sheets can pack together when wet so need loosening to let water and air move freely into the soil. Looks rough and ready but a thin layer of organic mulch on top can improve its appearance.



Grass clippings

Pros: Cheap. Good option for using material you can collect yourself.

Cons: Clippings can form sodden, packed mats and so need loosening to let water and air move freely into the soil. Best applied when the grass is dry.



Leaves and leaf mould

Pros: Cheap. Good option for using material you can collect yourself.

Cons: Wet leaves can pack into solid layers and so need loosening to let water and air move freely into the soil. Best to store leaves for a few weeks before you spread them.

