

Seasonal Tip

Mulch

Take a tip from Mother Nature and let natural mulch work for you in the garden this fall. Mulch is a multi-tasking garden friend that you can use without much effort and at no cost. Mulch is the easiest way to suppress weed growth naturally, maintain even soil temperature, conserve moisture, minimize soil erosion and compaction, and aid in water penetration. It even provides winter shelter for small wildlife and improves the soil quality as it breaks down.

Natural sources of mulch can be fallen leaves, grass clippings or pine needles. Grass clippings should be applied dry (fresh, green grass heats up and burns) and spread loosely. Pine needles tend to increase the acidity of the soil, so they work best around acid-loving plants such as rhododendron, blueberry, and winterberry (*Ilex verticillata*).

Leaves should be somewhat crumbled either by tearing or by chopping with a mulching mower. It's easy to take an armful of fallen leaves and rub them together as you let them drop onto the garden bed, or rake leaves mulched by the mower under your shrubs.

Mulch is most effective when applied at least two to four inches deep. Not only will it break down over the winter to provide great soil tilth, but it will also afford winter shelter for bumble bee queens and other over-wintering pollinators and critters. So no need to burn those leaves this year; instead let your garden benefit from the fall season!

— Sandra Alguire