

Mulching your garden

Mulching is one of the most important components in the establishment and maintenance of a garden. To mulch, means to cover the surface of the soil or growing medium with a layer of material eg straw, leaf litter or bark – **75 to 100mm deep is sufficient**. Mulching is the solution to many of the problems that confront Australian gardeners, it makes gardening easier and depending on the material used, it can also greatly enhance the visual appeal of a garden.

In our frequently hot, dry, infertile soils, mulching is a great problem-solver. These are some of the ways it can help your garden:

- Mulching reduces evaporation. Less watering is necessary, which saves time, money and is environmentally friendly. It is particularly valuable in areas where soil salinity is high.
- Mulching keeps soil temperatures cooler. Mulch allows the growing of many plants that like a cool root run but need full sun to flower well.
- The use of organic mulches means that the soil will benefit from the addition of nutrients as the mulch decomposes. Mulches attract earthworms which add to the health of the soil through aeration and provide readily available nutrients for plants in the form of worm casts.
- Because mulching protects the soil surface from the compacting effect of rain and sprinklers which can cause crusting, it allows the soil to absorb water more readily and prevents excessive run off. This can also help prevent erosion.
- Mulching helps to maintain good soil structure. This means that plant roots have maximum access to moisture and oxygen.
- Mulching is an effective and environmentally friendly way of achieving weed control.

Mulches can be organic, inorganic or living. The choice depends on the nature of the garden, the purpose of the mulch and the kinds of plants it surrounds. Because it adds nutrients, organic mulch is generally regarded as most desirable, however if long term weed suppression or a particular aesthetic effect is regarded as more important, inorganic or living mulches may be a better choice. Living mulch suppresses weeds and keep roots cool, but competes with other plants for water and nutrients. Often a combination is a good solution.

Types of mulches include:

- **organic mulches** eg pine bark mulch, bark chips, compost, leaf mould, lawn clippings, straw, seaweed, paper.
- **inorganic mulch** eg gravel, scoria, crushed rock, weed mat, plastic
- **living mulch** ie low-growing, dense, ground-cover plants