



*Pine straw mulch has good water retention for beds.*

# Much ado about Mulching

BY SHELLY FOY

Mulch is defined as any organic or inorganic material placed on the soil surface to modify the soil environment and enhance plant growth. What can you use as a mulch cover?

Cypress mulch, pine bark, pine straw, grass clippings, gravel, plastic, just to name a few.

What are the benefits of mulching?

- ◆ Prevents water loss by evaporation
  - ◆ Suppresses weeds
  - ◆ Maintains uniform soil temperatures
  - ◆ Prevents crusting of the soil surface
  - ◆ Organic mulches can improve soil structure by decaying and adding nutrients to the soil
  - ◆ Improves appearance
  - ◆ Mulched plants produce more roots
- So how do you know which mulches are better?

Let's compare a few of the most commonly used mulches. A survey by the University of Florida indicated that Cypress mulch is the favored material. It has a deep brown color and is known for its longevity.

Cypress mulch has a high water holding capacity which may reduce the amount of water reaching the plant. However, moist cypress mulch prevents loss by evaporation. In wind tests, 80 – 100% of cypress mulch remained intact.

In tests performed, *grass clippings* subsided more than any other mulch, they dry and decompose quickly, and are not good in terms of longevity. They change color rapidly, and in wind tests, only 20 – 40% of the grass clippings remained intact. While grass clippings may not make a good mulch for landscape plant beds, they are a good nitrogen source and can be used in out of play areas as a supple-

mental nutritional source.

Pine bark is another dark-colored mulch. The large size particles (1.5 to 3 inches in diameter) are more attractive and last longer. The larger material is also better for weed control than the smaller sized bark.

Pine straw has good water retention, holds color fairly well, and performed well in the wind tests. However, it decomposes rapidly and can contain weed seeds.

According to Florida's Solid Waste Management Act of 1988, yard trash (branches, leaves, or grass clippings) may not be disposed of in municipal landfills. Utilizing this material as a mulch is an alternative. One concern in using this yard trash however, is fungal contamination (mushrooms). Not only are these mushrooms not aesthetically acceptable, they may restrict water infiltration.

## Mulches can be used through entire landscape beds or around trees and shrubs.

Those surveyed in the University of Florida tests were interested in using a combination of a layer of the expensive cypress mulch on top of this yard trash material. The combination of the two helps cut down on the cost and also provides an avenue for disposal of this yard trash material.

Perhaps some test areas of this combination can be tried on your golf course to see what the effects would be. Inorganic mulches such as gravel, pebbles and stone are occasionally used. They are permanent, fireproof and there are many colors available to pick from to better blend in with their surroundings.

The disadvantages would be that mowers could be damaged by this material or flying debris could possibly hurt someone. They also reflect solar radiation, and therefore would create a very hot environment during the summer.

Plastic films are good for weed control, however they don't allow water or air movement and therefore can deplete the soil over time. They would need to be covered with an organic mulch to make them aesthetically pleasing. They are not recommended for poorly draining areas because they would keep the soil too wet and might result in disease problems.

Can you restore color to mulches?



*This cypress mulch walkway suppresses weeds and keeps a high-traffic profile area looking neat.*

You can apply a thin (1-inch or less) layer of fresh mulch, however this can be costly. You can rake the existing mulch and restore its appearance. There is also a mulch colorant, which is a dye that is sprayed on to restore color. If a colorant is used, apply carefully because they can cause skin and eye irritations.

So now that we have familiarized ourselves with some different mulch materials, where, when and how do we use them?

Mulches can be used through entire landscape beds, or around trees and shrubs. For trees, create a circle of mulch 2 feet in diameter for each inch of trunk

diameter. Increase this area as the tree grows.

Keep mulch 1 to 2 inches away from stems and trunks of plants in order to minimize possible disease outbreaks. If using wood or bark mulches, do not exceed 2 or 3 inches in depth. Too much mulch can result in shallow rooted plants suffocating. Pine needles and pine bark can be as deep as 4 inches because they allow good air movement.

Mulches can be applied anytime. How often to mulch would depend on which material is used. Cypress mulch, pine bark and wood chips only need to be replenished every 1 - 2 years.