

PHOTOS COURTESY JODI MILLER AT OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY EXTENSION



people like. Like other organic mulches, it starts decomposing and turns itself into organic material which feeds the roots of the plants. There are some fungi that can form on the mulch, though, if it is left alone. A simple way to prevent this is to freshen your mulch (by raking it or redistributing it) about once a month.

► Pine or cypress bark mulch is a slower decomposing mulch than hardwood bark. They are popular to use as a cover-up, such as flanking a sidewalk up to a front door.

► Straw is most often used as a winter protection and as a summer mulch in fruit and vegetable planting. It may carry weed seeds, and it is flammable. Don't use hay.

► Stones, rocks or pebbles

have their place in mulching but usually in small amounts for color contrast or to highlight a certain area.

There are many other mulches such as black polyethylene, sawdust, and buckwheat hulls, that are used for specific plants and areas. But, keep in mind that whatever the mulch, two to three inches is enough, or the mulch will interfere with the root system's oxygen. Also, to prevent insect infestation, don't spread mulch right up to a house. Leave six to eight inches of bare dirt around the foundation.

One more thing to remember about mulch—if it's already there, and you're going to plant, rake it off. If the soil is poor and needs some organic matter, you can rototill old organic mulch into the soil, but don't use new. Otherwise, the mulch will use the needed nitrogen to decompose instead of leaving it for the plants.

You can get more information on mulch from your local extension office, or at Ohio State University's web site (<http://hortwww-2.ag.ohiostate.edu/hvp/HVP1.html>). **LM**

Mulch is a material, organic or inorganic, that's spread on the soil around and under plants. This is, admittedly, a broad definition, and makes for a lot of choices. All of the products have their pluses and minuses, so what it comes down to, in most cases, is what your customers want to see in their yards or gardens.

All mulches, from peat moss to rocks, do three basic things: hold soil temperature steady, reduce moisture loss, and help reduce weed growth. But mulch does these things in different ways. Here's a glimpse at some of the more popular mulches and their benefits:

► Peat moss is generally available and ideal for mulching evergreens and other plants that grow

best in acidic soil. It remains effective for one or two years, depending on the amount applied.

► Hardwood bark mulch is shredded hardwood, such as oak, and has a dark color many

Mulches: take your choice

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