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# Mulch Much: Save Water

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## GARDEN NOTES

# MULCH MUCH: SAVE WATER

*By Dennis Hinkamp*

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Many people are concerned about the water situation. Fortunately, there are some common sense methods for conserving moisture in the landscape. The number one thing to do is mulch. A mulch is defined as, "a covering or mass of organic matter spread over the soil and around plants." There are many different types of mulches, each with distinct advantages and disadvantages.

All mulches conserve moisture, says Jerry Goodspeed, Utah State University Extension horticulturist. This is accomplished by reducing the amount of water lost to evaporation. As air and wind move across the surface of the soil, surface water evaporates or changes from a liquid to a vapor. As this occurs, more moisture is drawn to the surface, reducing the amount of water available for the plants' roots. Mulches help the soil retain its water, and should be at least three inches thick to be the most effective.

The most popular mulch is decorative bark, he says. It is available in different sizes. Regardless of the size, bark looks great for about a month. After a few weeks it begins to fade a little. By the second year it looks like old, worn bark. Add a small top dressing of new bark mulch every year or so to keep it looking good and restore any that has decomposed.

Larger bark chunks are the most expensive, and are often thought to be the most ornate, Goodspeed says. They last the longest in the landscape because they are slow to decompose or blow away in strong wind storms.

"I prefer medium-sized bark," he says. "It looks more natural than larger chunks, tends to cover the ground a little better, and stays put in high winds. Smaller sized bark breaks down very quickly, and almost looks like thick compost. It tends to fade a little quicker, but looks very natural. It is the least expensive."

Compost can also be used as a mulch, Goodspeed says. Compost's effects last longer because it improves the soil by increasing its ability to retain moisture. It can be expensive and must be resupplied every year to be effective.

There are also a number of different rocks that can be used as mulch, he adds. Gravel, marble rock and lava in many colors and sizes are available at local nurseries. They do not decompose, and seldom need to be resupplied or replaced, but if rocks are going to be used as

mulch, consider them a permanent fixture. When using rocks as a mulch, place some weed barrier fabric under them to keep the weeds down, he explains. It is quite a chore to control weeds in a pile of rocks.

"Soil pep" is also available as a mulch, he says. It is expensive, but is a great product. It is good for the soil and decomposes rather quickly. Like compost, it's a good idea to reapply it every year.

Synthetic mulches include weed barrier fabrics and plastics, Goodspeed says. The fabrics can last up to 15 years when covered with bark, rocks or another organic matter, and they allow water and nutrients to penetrate. Plastic barriers are short-lived, and can be a real mess to replace or remove.

"Keep whatever mulch you use consistent throughout the landscape," he says. "Whenever I see a landscape that uses gravel in one bed, bark in another and lava around the trees, I wonder how the gardener dresses himself. I envision a tie over a t-shirt with pajama bottoms and some cowboy boots. A more uniform theme helps with both dressing and landscaping."

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