

What is the best Mulch around Perennials?



- Every year we get the questions. Such and such plant didn't survive. Do you have anything hardier, bigger, better, to live with the shrubs and trees we planted?

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- Sometimes we feel like Sherlock Holmes trying to unravel a mystery! Is it the plant or is it something else? And the clues often lead us to ask about mulch. Did you use mulch? What kind did you use? How deep did you apply mulch? Did you make sure to pull the mulch away from the perennials and grasses that were planted?
 - Sound familiar?



WHY MULCH MATTERS...

There are lots of good reasons to use mulch! We highly recommend it.

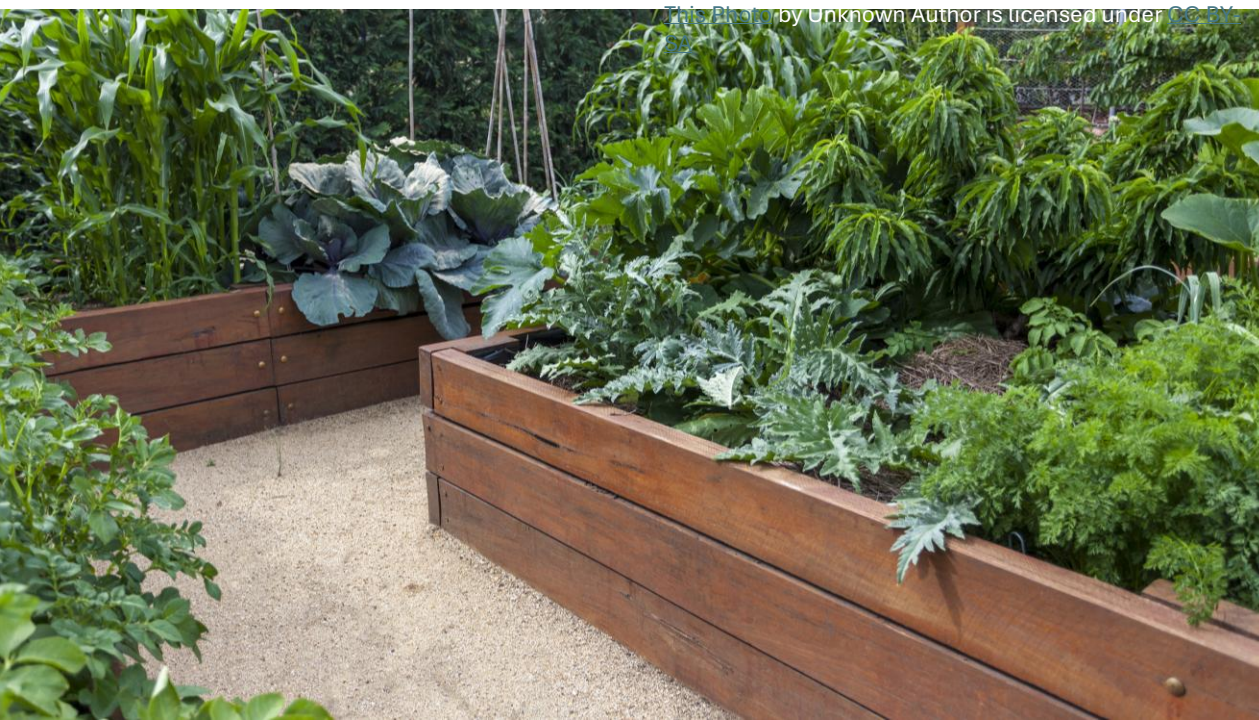
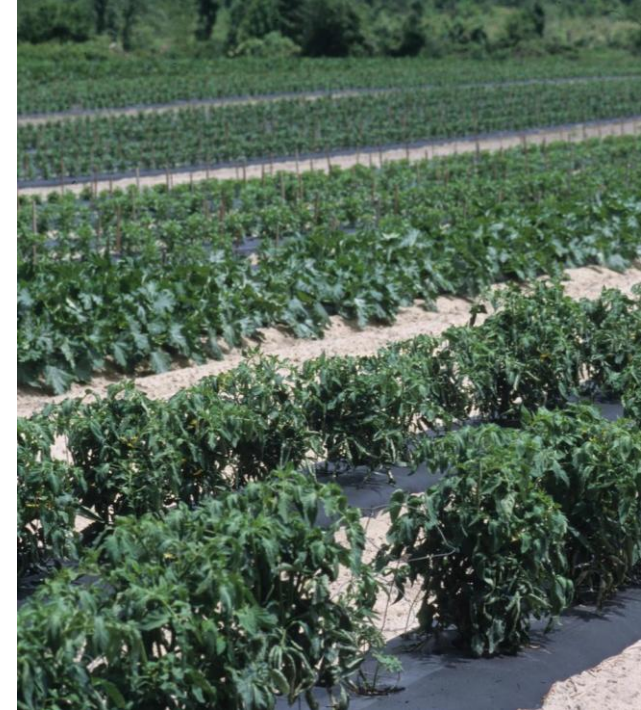
Mulch keeps weeds to a minimum and helps keep moisture in the soil.

It also keeps soil temperatures from getting too warm when it's hot and in the winter, it protects perennials from extreme cold, insulating the root zone.

The right type of mulch improves the soil, adding nutrients and organic matter.

AND mulch in the flower garden helps it look its best!





Because, by definition, mulch is a layer of material used as a covering over exposed soil. AND Vegetable gardens tend to be amended with compost every year, a vegetable garden can be mulched with just about anything...carpet remnants to black plastic.

However, we recommend beneficial mulch, made with natural and biodegradable materials only, for any garden or landscape. Wood chips, pine bark, leaves, straw and grass clippings are all examples of beneficial mulch because they decompose and provide many benefits to your soil.

The mulch used in a landscape bed filled with trees and shrubs only can be larger, like hardwood chips, than a bed of or mixed with perennials, annuals and/or grasses. The best mulch for perennial gardens and mixed borders is neutral in color and finely textured.



So, what do we suggest?

- We like a beneficial mulch for either perennial or mixed landscape beds. Beneficial mulch feeds the soil as it decomposes. It should be organic, which means it will decompose and enrich the soil, without adding unwanted chemicals. It also needs to be refreshed, usually every year! When you apply fresh mulch, check the depth. More than 2" thick, and it can start to deflect rainwater or irrigation. Thick mulch also attracts voles and rodents.
- For **perennial and mixed landscape beds** that include shrubs and trees with perennials we suggest double or triple shredded mulch or ground bark mulch. These are excellent mulches for mixed landscape beds as they are closer to the compost or leaf mold used to amend soil.





MULCHES TO AVOID

- Wood chips or nuggets, shredded bark mulch and sawdust are not recommended for flower gardens or mixed landscape borders.
- They may be okay for landscaping with trees and shrubs only, but if these high carbon materials are used around herbaceous perennials and annuals, your plants will suffer.
- These materials can alter soil pH and, in order to break them down, microbes “steal” nitrogen from the soil, depriving perennials of this important nutrient.
- And they encourage rot around the stems of herbaceous plants when applied too closely.



The following materials, while natural and biodegradable, **will not** give you a desirable, finished look:

- Pine Needles (or Pine Straw) while attractive, are naturally acidic. Save it for acid loving plants like azaleas.
- Grass clippings can be tricky as they can fuse into a mat, no matter how dry they are when put down.
- Well-rotted straw is a good mulch, but clumpy. It is hard to spread and looks rough.



- Polyester weed fabric and black plastic are not recommended for flower beds.
- They may be fine for covering large landscaped areas, with trees and shrubs, but are difficult in a densely planted flower bed. Shallow-rooted perennials also dislike fabric and plastic mulch.
- There are many articles out there about the problems with weed barrier and black plastic. It is a short-term solution at best.



- **Shredded rubber mulch, lava rocks and stone are a straight on NO!**
- Lava rocks and stone create an environment that can get too hot for perennials and kill them.
- Rubber mulch gets mixed into the soil and does nothing beneficial for it and the oils in the rubber introduce unwanted chemicals into the soil.
- **DON'T DO IT**





- Gravel Gardens are a whole different animal, so to speak. Requiring proper preparation of soil, a much deeper layer of gravel, specific planting techniques and watering to become established.

OTHER FACTORS

(WEATHER & SOIL TYPE)

- In hot climates, plants benefit from a loose, relatively dry mulch such as shredded leaves. This helps trap air and insulate roots from extreme heat.
- If summers are cool and rainy, compost and leaf mold are good options. They don't get soggy in wet weather with less chance of fungal disease and pests like slugs and earwigs.
- And, in cold climates, give the soil some time to warm up in the spring before applying mulch.
- In heavy and poorly drained sites, don't use a thick, moisture retentive mulch. Both the soil and plant roots need to breathe.
- With sandy or stony soil, it is even more important to mulch with compost or shredded leaves. These add nutrients and organic matter to the soil.
- It is also good to know if your soil is acidic or alkaline. This may also play a part in deciding what mulch to use.





TIPS FOR MULCHING FLOWER GARDENS AND MIXED BORDERS



- When mulching around perennials, keep the material an inch or two AWAY from the crown of the plant. When moisture gets trapped against the stems it causes rot and disease problems.
- This fact is **sooooo** important and many times is the true crux of the problem of perennial survival in a mixed border!
- Our suggestion for avoiding the “mulch against the stems” problem is to use the pot the plant came in. After planting, but before mulching, place the upside-down pot over the plant. Put down the mulch. Then remove the pot. Voila!



Another suggestion is to use more creeping or low-growing perennials that can function as a living mulch. This includes such perennials as Creeping Phlox, Iberis, Ajuga and Liriope.

This illustration is a variation of an idea pioneered by Piet Oudolf and other naturalistic designers of perennial gardens: use dense, shorter, less showy plants as a foundation or matrix to fill in around those that are taller and more colorful. It serves the same function as mulch: suppressing weeds, keeping the soil moist and cool, and adding organic matter. But it can also give gardens a meadow-like fullness, providing a calm background to the most exciting plants.

In a densely planted flower border or garden, there is little need for mulch for weed suppression. **However, it is essential for enriching the soil, which is a very good reason to use a good, beneficial mulch regularly, BTW!** Once the plants have leafed-out they create a canopy that shades the soil, helps to reduce moisture loss and control weed growth.



We thank Longfield Gardens for their excellent information on this subject!
<https://www.longfield-gardens.com/article/Best-Mulch-for-Flower-Gardens>

Thank you

Questions? Comments?
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