

Mulch and Soil Amendments

Big benefits

Mulch offers several benefits, including weed control, increased aesthetics, temperature moderation and moisture retention for the soil. The most common form of mulch is shredded hardwood or bark mulch. What most people don't realize is that mulch is technically a soil amendment that replaces organic matter and adds nutrients to the soil. There are many types of mulch, including leaf hummus, and composted material which can provide enormous benefits to the landscape when used appropriately.

Healthy soil

Most soil is healthiest when it contains at least 5% organic matter, though annual and perennial beds require more. Organic matter reduces soil compaction, which improves air and water flow. Certain mulches are rich in nutrients that benefit the plants. Organic matter needs to be replenished periodically because it decomposes and breaks down.

In nature, this process occurs naturally when plant debris is recycled through the decomposition process. That process takes time - time we don't have in our gardens. In our urban landscapes and gardens, it is necessary to remove leaves, branches and plant debris because they are unsightly and can be good hiding places for pests. By adding soil amendments we continue the natural cycle that is interrupted.

By replenishing organic matter into our beds with materials that have begun the decomposition process already, we speed the cycle and provide many benefits to our urban landscapes.

Applications

Soil amendments may be applied and incorporated into the landscape by top-dressing, forking in, or rototilling. The method most commonly used is top-dressing. As a top-dressing, mulch is used



to cover areas of the landscape that may not be fully planted, thereby preventing weeds and aiding in moisture retention.

Shredded hardwood bark mulches are great for this, but leaf compost and other composted material can also be used.

Tilling organic matter into the soil is done by using a pitch fork, or mini-tiller, to gently work the material into the soil. This method is best for adding modest amounts of material that need to be incorporated into the soil quickly.

Delicate balance

Generally, soil amendments should be added whenever the previous material has become depleted.

For hardwood or bark mulch, not more than 1.5" to 2" of mulch should be applied at any one time, keeping total accumulation at 2" or less. Excessive mulch on top of the soil can trap moisture in the soil during heavy wet periods leading to root rot; and it can prevent moisture from getting to the roots during drier periods.

As you can see, there is more to mulching and adding soil amendments than just spreading wood chips over a bed. Mulching is an essential cultural practice for a healthy, beautiful landscape.



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