

## Easy Gardening...Mulching

B. Dean McCraw  
Extension Horticulturist  
Texas Agricultural Extension Service

Mulching your garden shows you really care about your plants. A mulch is any substance spread on the ground to protect plant roots from heat, cold or drought or to keep fruit clean.

Mulching is a long established horticultural practice. Farmers know that shallow cultivation of the soil's surface after a rain slows the rate of water loss from the soil. The shallow layer of dry surface soil acts as a mulch.

Mulches can be classified as inorganic or organic. Inorganic mulches include plastic, rocks, rock chips and other non-plant materials; whereas, organic mulches include straw, compost, sawdust and similar materials. Plastic is the only inorganic mulch used in vegetable gardens.

### Value of Mulches

A thin layer of mulch on the soil surface (especially in sloping gardens) reduces the washing away of soil particles by rushing water. Also, mulches prevent raindrops from splashing on the soil surface. See figure 1.

Saving soil moisture is an important use of mulch in Texas. A mulch layer on the soil surface allows the soil to soak up more water. Mulch also reduces the rate of water loss from the soil. A 3-inch layer of mulch on the soil surface dries much faster than the soil below it. Thus it prevents water from moving into the air. See figure 2.



Figure 1

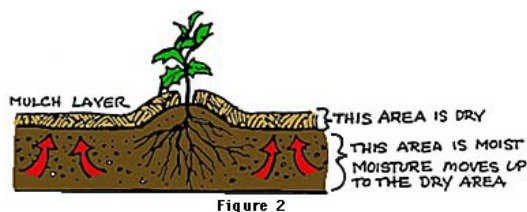


Figure 2

Mulches modify soil temperature in home gardens. Applied in late fall, winter mulch insulates plant roots, crowns and stems of winter crops from extremely low temperatures.

[next page](#)