

Mulching Possibilities

Compost

Gloucester Township Public Works provides compost each year. Spreading a thin layer around plants and topping it off with another mulch such as chopped leaves or straw will keep the compost moist and biologically active, which will provide maximum benefit for your plants.

Shredded Leaves

Shredding fallen autumn leaves creates a nutrient-rich mulch for free. A lawn mower performs this service nicely.

Grass Clippings--Pesticide Free

If using fresh clippings as mulch, use a layer $\frac{1}{4}$ inch thick. This will allow the grass to start to break down before it begins to smell or rot. Thicker layers have a tendency to remain too wet and can invite mold and create smelly decay issues. Dried clippings can go on thicker and make excellent side dresses for vegetable crops. You can also use grass clippings to line paths in the garden to keep down mud and prevent weeds in exposed dirt areas. Dried grass clippings mixed with two times as much dried leaf litter will create compost with a healthy balance of nutrients and will break down quickly due to the correct carbon to nitrogen ratio. The proper ratio avoids such issues as smells, mold, slow decomposition and heat retention while allowing you to use up the nitrogen rich grass clippings.

Straw, Weed-free Hay, or Salt Hay

These all help retain soil moisture, keep down weeds, and add organic matter to the soil when they break down. Be sure the hay is weed and seed free, or you will be creating trouble for your garden. Also, check out the source of any of the above. You want them to have been grown without herbicides or pesticides. (Agway in Berlin has used the same straw producer for about 20 years.) Check the internet to find the pros and cons of each.

Plastic Sheeting

Putting down sheets of plastic and cutting a hole where you want to put your transplants will definitely help keep down the weeds and retain moisture in the soil. However, it does not add anything to the soil. Be sure to add amendments before putting the plastic down in the spring. Remove the plastic in the fall and add amendments along with shredded leaves or grow a cover crop to enrich the soil for the following year.

Forbidden Mulches

Shredded bark and wood chips are not good additions to a garden or yard. Wood mulch is often made by grinding up old pallets and other trash wood which may contain arsenic, creosote and

other poisonous chemicals. Even wood chips that are "clean" are not advisable. Wood is high in carbon. Carbon seeks out nitrogen to help it break down into the soil, just like in a compost pile. If you mulch your plants with wood, it will steal food from the plants.

Rubber mulch is even worse. It is made from ground-up tires. Rubber mulch leaches zinc and other pollutants which are toxic.