Autumn is the time to apply mulch around landscape plants or to freshen up the mulch that may have decomposed during the past year or blown away from the recent hurricanes.

Mulch is any material that is applied to the soil surface. It can be an organic material, such as wood chips, leaves and pine needles, or an inorganic material, such as woven ground cloth.

Not only does mulch add to the beauty of the landscape by giving it a uniform color and texture, but it also benefits the soil it covers and the plants it surrounds.

Mulch helps prevent water evaporation from the soil, suppresses weeds and keeps a more uniform soil temperature. It works as an insulator, keeping soil cool during the hot summer months and warm during cold weather. Organic mulches can also improve soil structure. As the organic material decays, it becomes topsoil and adds nutrients for the plants.

Organic mulches are readily available during the fall and should be used. Most of the yard waste collected at this time, including leaves, grass clippings and pine needles, can be recycled as mulch.

This is an efficient use of yard waste. It retains the nutrients in the landscape, saves money from purchasing manufactured mulch, and may reduce tax dollars otherwise spent in transporting and disposing of the yard waste. Organic mulches can be used with each other or alone.

Pine needles are a great organic mulch to use in home landscaping. Besides being attractive, they do not compact or become matted down and are not easily removed from the landscape by wind or rain. A downside to pine needles is that they need to be replaced every four to six months because they decompose rapidly.

Leaves work well as mulch - but only when they are shredded. If used whole and alone in a landscape, they will most likely be blown away by wind or washed away by heavy rains. When using leaves, combine them with another organic mulch that is heavier and can, help weigh them down.

Grass clippings should be spread thinly and evenly around landscape plants. Clippings decompose easily and provide valuable nutrients to the soil. However, grass clippings should not be used alone as mulch. They are easily moved by wind and rain and will have to be replenished often because they decompose fast. Grass clippings do best when mixed with other types of mulches.

Various types of bark and wood chips are the most popular choice of organic mulch in home landscapes. These mulches provide a nice color and are usually long-lasting. They are also readily available in bulk from home improvement stores or garden centers.

Gravel, pebbles, crushed stone and rubber mulches are inorganic products that are permanent and not recommended for use in the landscape. Because they are inorganic, they will never decompose and will become mixed in with the soil.

Caution also must be used with these mulches when it comes to lawn maintenance. If they fall into the lawn, they could be easily taken up by a lawn mower and thrown. They may also cause landscapes to become very hot during the summer, harming the plants they surround.

Woven ground cloth is another inorganic mulch option. This is a fabric material that has been treated so it
will not decompose. It is effective in controlling the majority of weeds but does not prevent moisture loss or affect soil temperatures. Another mulching material is recommended for use on top of the fabric to help with these factors.

Mulch should be applied to the entire plant bed, keeping 1 to 2 inches from the stems and trunks of plants. If using wood or bark mulches that contain fine particles, mulch 2 to 3 inches deep (after settling). Too much mulch could suffocate plants and hinder water from entering the soil. Pine needles and other coarse-textured mulches that provide good air movement can be maintained at 4 inches deep. Leaves and grass clippings should never be more than 2 inches deep.

Whichever mulch you decide to use will provide some protection for the soil and plants. It will also add to the beauty of your landscape.

For more information on mulches, or any other plant-related information, contact the Osceola County Extension Service. Master gardeners are available to take your calls, Monday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Call 321-697-3000.

Jennifer Welshans
Horticulture Agent
Osceola County Extension Service
1921 Kissimmee Valley Lane
Kissimmee, FL 34744
321-697-3000
jwel2@osceola.org
osceola.ifas.ufl.edu
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