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Saving Water by Mulching

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Mulch can help you save water! This may seem unlikely, but it's true. A benefit of mulch, which is any material that is placed on the soil surface to protect and improve an area, is to prevent water loss through evaporation from the soil. Mulch prevents this loss by covering the surface and creating a barrier that holds in the water where our plants need it. In order to get the maximum water saving benefit from mulch, there are a few things to consider.

What kind of mulch to use

There are many different types of organic mulch available and each has pros and cons. I'll briefly discuss three kinds. The most popular type is cypress mulch because it lasts a long time and has a nice brown color. This type does a good job buffering the soil against water loss when the mulch is completely wet. However, dry cypress mulch repels water, which makes it difficult to wet. Another down side is that it may decrease the amount of water reaching plant roots due to its high water holding capacity. Finally, cypress trees are slow growing and provide an important ecological service by filtering water and providing habitat for wildlife. As the demand for cypress mulch increases, our cypress forests decrease.

Pine bark is another popular kind of mulch because its dark color is very attractive in the landscape. The larger size nuggets (1.5 to 3 inches big) last longer and provide better weed control than smaller nuggets. A negative of pine bark mulch is that it can float away during large rainstorms.

A third option is straw. This can be more economical than the other mulches, but it isn't as attractive and breaks down quickly. In addition, it may contain seeds that become weeds in your landscape.

If you would like to minimize your mulching efforts, then inorganic mulch may be the best option for you. Gravel and pebbles are permanent, fireproof, and have more color options. The one bit of caution with this type is that it can create a very hot landscape environment since it reflects solar radiation. Plastic film is useful, but clear film will allow weed growth because light is able to penetrate through. Plastic film should not be used in areas that have poorly drained soil because the soil will remain too wet, which may lead to root diseases. Another inorganic mulch option is woven ground cloth, which allows water and air to move through it. The disadvantage is that it doesn't suppress weed growth and water loss. Woven cloth must be used in combination with another mulching material to get the best effect.

How to mulch

Since mulch holds moisture in, the material must be properly applied so it does not harm the plants. When applying a layer of mulch to plant beds, keep the mulch one to two inches away from trunks and stems of plants. Encircle individual trees with mulch that is two feet in diameter for every inch of trunk diameter. As the tree grows, increase the mulched area. The mulch should also be kept one to two inches away from the trunk.

How much to apply

This depends on the type you choose. Apply most wood and bark mulches two to three inches deep. Do not apply more because this type contains a lot of fine particles that can suffocate plant roots if applied too deep. Pine straw and pine nuggets can be applied up to four inches deep since it allows for more air flow. After applying the mulch of your choice, monitor it occasionally looking for decomposition, and add more where it is needed.

Mulch is a great way to beautify your landscape, and it benefits your plants by keeping the water where it is needed most.