

Mulch:

Mulch is an essential component of gardening in a semi-arid climate like ours, for several reasons. Mulching minimizes evaporation. It cools plant root zones, which reduces the amount of water plants lose through evapotranspiration. It reduces weed growth, and it helps control erosion. Mulch also adds a finished look to the garden.

There are two basic types of mulch - organic and inorganic. Organic mulch is wood-based, such as pole peelings, chipper chips, cedar chips, and deco bark. Organic mulch will decompose over time and improve soil texture, but it will need to be replaced periodically. It's an ideal choice in new gardens, where plants are much smaller than their mature size. The mulch will fill in the empty spaces and slow weed growth. As the plants mature and spread, they'll cover the mulched area so you won't have to keep replacing the mulch.

Inorganic mulch is stone-based. Types of inorganic mulch include cobblestone, river rock, pea gravel and lava rock. Inorganic mulch rarely needs to be replaced, but it tends to retain and radiate heat so it's not the best choice to go along the sunny side of a house. It works best in a more formal setting where the rock will remain visible even when plants are mature.

Organic mulch should be applied directly on top of the soil in a three to four inch layer. Inorganic mulch may be applied on top of the soil or over a weed barrier fabric, and should be layered two to four inches deep. [NOTE: never apply mulch over black plastic. Plastic doesn't allow moisture or air to penetrate, and can kill useful organisms in the soil.]