

Mulch and Compost

Q - I have heard that rather than the standard mulch I can use other things that add nutrients to the soil more quickly. For example, I am thinking of putting a two-inch layer of compost around my plants. Will this work or are there better alternatives? I tried small bark mulch previously and was unhappy.

A - Depending on your plants, a two-inch layer of good compost is beneficial to their growth and health. Good compost typically consists of decayed plant material such as ground up leaves, food scraps (not meat), and wood that has been through the composting process.

You can make your own compost from: ground up leaves, food scraps, old tea bags, coffee grounds, grass clippings and other plant-based materials. Composting is a whole subject unto itself. Here is a good website on that topic: <https://uthort.tennessee.edu/fall-save-your-leaves-save-some-green/>. You can type compost into the site search bar and get a lot more information from the UT database of publications. You can even buy good compost at a couple of compost dealers in this area.

You are correct about bark chips. They are decorative but take some time to decay and do not have the nutrients that compost has. However, don't count mulching out. There is a Timely Topic for TN Landscapes entry titled *Organic Mulch Tips & Facts* at this webpage on the UT Horticultural website: <https://uthort.tennessee.edu/organic-mulch-tips-facts/>. You can also search the same site for publication SP617, *Mulching Your Trees and Landscapes*, for indepth information on mulch, what mulch options to consider, and how to apply it properly.

Adding nutrition can also take the form of fertilizer. If you choose to do this, select the right fertilizer for the plant. For example, if your plant is acid-loving like an azalea, choose a fertilizer that will lower the PH of the soil around your plant along with nutrients that will help that specific plant. And always follow the directions on the label of your fertilizers. Too much may do more harm than good.

I hope this answered your question about mulch and composting. Please respond to this email if you have any follow-up questions. We will be happy to look into it for you.

Thank you for using our website and asking this question!

The Northeast Tennessee Master Gardeners