

## Should I Mulch Now or Later?

Q: Is it better to mulch now or just wait until spring? I can get bags of mulch on sale this Labor Day weekend!

A: Nature answers that question for us every year when the leaves fall. However, anytime is a good time to add mulch to your gardens and the areas around the base of your trees. Mulching in your home garden will help keep your flower's roots a little bit warmer during the winter, cooler in the summer, and help control weeds.

There are basically two types of mulch, organic and inorganic. One of the benefits of using organic mulch is that it decays and adds nutrients to the soil. The finer the mulch (such as compost, pine straw, ground up leaves, or wood), the faster the material nutrients will break down and help your soil.

Azaleas do better with pine straw around them.

Inorganic mulches such as river pebbles, gravel and brick pieces should have a plastic sheet or weed barrier cloth to keep weeds from taking root in the soil beneath. But like I learned about those pesky weeds (the hard way, of course), proper preparation prevents poor performance.

Get rid of those weeds before you put down your mulch with whatever you are comfortable with.

UT publication 617 (<https://extension.tennessee.edu/publications/Documents/SP617.pdf>, or [bit.ly/3BEfCiX](https://bit.ly/3BEfCiX)) recommends a 2–4-inch layer of mulch to help prevent weed germination and growth.

When mulching around your trees, UT research strongly advises against piling your mulch around the trunk base or “volcano” mulching. It is called volcano mulching because it is piled up around the tree in a way that resembles the formation of a volcano and will mess up your trees. This piling of mulch up against the tree will cause moisture retention at the base, which results in cracking of the bark and allows harmful insects and fungi access to the vulnerable areas beneath the bark. The tree roots will also start growing into this mulch pile. Some websites even stated that rodents could live in these volcano piles and chew up the base of the tree.

UT research recommends that you mulch 4-6 inches away from the trunk, 2-4 inches deep and 4-6 feet in diameter around the base of your trees. The benefit here is that the tree roots don't compete with your lawn for rainwater.

When you are ready to buy mulch, be prepared. There are some commercial websites that make the calculations very easy for you to get close to the right amount of mulch you need.