

Putting the Beds to Bed: Winter Mulch Tips for Tennessee Gardeners (published 2025-11-15)
By Wes Walker, Master Gardener

2026 MASTER GARDENER PROGRAM Enroll now for classes at the Sullivan County Extension office beginning January 27, 2026. Go to [2026 Tennessee Extension Master Gardener Program/Training | Sullivan County](#) for details.

As the leaves begin to fall across northeast Tennessee, smart gardeners are turning their attention to one simple but powerful practice—mulching their flower and raised beds before winter sets in. Though it may seem like a purely aesthetic touch, fall and winter mulching offers real protection and long-term benefits for gardens in USDA Zone 7, where mild spells and sudden cold snaps often trade places throughout the season.

Mulch acts as an insulating blanket, helping soil temperatures stay more consistent when the weather swings from warm to freezing. Those fluctuations can push plant roots and bulbs toward the surface in a process called frost heaving, leaving them exposed and damaged. Waiting to apply mulch until the ground begins to freeze is key, experts say. Cornell Cooperative Extension recommends holding off until that point to prevent rodents from nesting and to allow soil temperatures to stabilize. Once the top layer of soil is frozen, a layer of mulch will lock in that temperature and shield the roots beneath.

Moisture is another concern in winter, even when rain is frequent. Organic mulch helps soil retain moisture by reducing evaporation and limiting temperature-driven drying. For newly planted perennials and evergreens, that steady moisture level can make a significant difference in survival rates through winter's dry spells.

Weed control is another bonus. A few inches of mulch smother light-hungry winter annual weeds, meaning fewer unwelcome sprouts in spring. Mulch depth—ideally two to three inches—is critical for blocking light while still allowing air and water to reach the soil. Mulch that's too thin won't suppress weeds effectively, while a layer too thick can trap moisture and suffocate roots.

Over time, organic mulches do more than protect; they improve the soil itself. As materials such as shredded leaves, straw, or compost break down, they enrich soil with organic matter, stimulate beneficial microbes, and enhance structure and water-holding capacity. Those slow, natural improvements make a visible difference in plant health by the following growing season. Raised beds, in particular, benefit from this winter insulation. Because they warm up faster in spring and cool down faster in winter, their soil temperatures can fluctuate even more than in-ground beds. Raised beds' exposure increases the need for mulching or other insulation methods to prevent rapid cooling and drying. A blanket of mulch can help moderate those extremes and keep overwintering roots comfortable.

The choice of mulch material matters, too. Shredded leaves—free, plentiful, and nutrient-rich—are a favorite option if they're chopped finely enough to avoid matting. Clean straw makes a light, airy cover for vegetable and bulb beds, while pine needles offer a slow-to-decompose option for acid-loving ornamentals. A thin layer of compost beneath another mulch type can

boost nutrients without creating a soggy mat. Regardless of material, be wary of creating the “mulch volcano” effect—piling mulch directly against stems or tree trunks—which can trap moisture against bark and invite rot and pests. Keep mulch a few inches away from crowns and stems for proper airflow.

For timing, the process is straightforward: clean out dead or diseased plant material, remove weeds, water if the soil is dry, then apply mulch after the first hard freeze. In windy areas, a light watering or a few brushy branches laid across the surface can help anchor leaves or straw. As spring warms up, pull the mulch back from plant crowns to prevent rot but keep a thinner layer to suppress summer weeds and conserve moisture.

For gardeners in northeast Tennessee, where winter can turn from balmy to biting overnight, mulching is one of the most effective, low-cost ways to protect soil and roots. A few inches of organic material added at the right time helps stabilize temperature and moisture, suppress weeds, and build richer soil—all while setting up the garden for a healthier, more manageable spring. Until next time, keep “workin’ th’ dirt!”

Resources

“Protecting Plants from Winter Damage.” <https://www.uvm.edu/extension/news/protecting-plants-winter-damage>

“Applying Mulches in Home Fruit Plantings.” <https://extension.psu.edu/applying-mulches-in-home-fruit-plantings/>

“Mulching Your Trees and Landscapes,” [https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_agexfores/74/\(TRACE\)](https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_agexfores/74/(TRACE))

For more information about gardening, visit UTHORT’s YouTube site for helpful videos: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCjS3d1IkIH1OZ1Z2qPvhgfQ>

Or Washington County’s YouTube site: <https://www.youtube.com/@utextensionwashingtoncounty>

How do I ask a question?

If you have a question for the Master Gardeners, submit them to us on our website at www.netmga.net. Click the link at the top of the page, “ASK A MASTER GARDENER” to send in your question. Questions that are not answered in this column will receive a response from a Master Gardener to the contact information you provide.