

MUCH ABOUT MULCH

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Like butterflies, mulch comes in many forms -- both organic and inorganic. For rosarians, the organic form works best. It would be advisable for rose growers to first realize the value of mulching and then learn of the various forms available on the market. Answers to many mulching questions are to be sought if we really want to grow award-winning roses.

Even though mulching is one of the best ways to ensure good roses, too many rose growers omit this valuable phase of rose culture. Some actually doubt its value and dismiss it from their work regimen. We must dispel this notion. Why is mulching essential to good rose bush growth? Which form of mulch provides the best results? Why bother with this seemingly extra chore? Won't roses perform just as well without its use? Since mulching commands so much importance, it is imperative that we kindle enthusiastic involvement among those who fail to recognize its worth. Let's take a brief look at mulching to verify its value.

Mulch in its original Middle English term meant "rotten hay", which was supposed to enable the rose to have a softer and mellower life through its application. For centuries, some rosarians have maintained this theory to be correct. They have applied various forms of organic material to enhance the growth and beauty of the rose. Unlike inorganic mulches, which provide cosmetic benefits only, organic mulches provide both nutrition and protection against the torrid heat of summer and the frigid conditions of winter. Let's discuss the several benefits that mulching provides.

Roses are lovers of a moist root system. In fact, it is paramount to good growth. Mulches that are generously applied will help to maintain root hydration. Ideal application is a 2 to 4 inch mulch depth. Retention of moisture through the use of mulch lowers the water bill, too. Also, a thick blanket of mulch restricts weed growth and reduces this laborious task to insignificance.

Making the decision to use mulch, the rosarian has access to numerous products that have been used by the rose-growing public. Everything from shredded newspaper to corncobs has served as mulch. In my quarter century of growing roses I have experimented with many materials. Whether it be compost, horse manure, shredded leaves, ground pine bark, or pine needles, to mention only a few, I have tried all of them. Of all the products used in mulching, mushroom compost has served me best. Fortunately, I live near a mushroom plant and ready access to the product is easy. Just why does this product perform best? Its makeup tells me that soil enrichment is guaranteed because the numerous elements contained therein are essential to plant growth. These materials are its components: wheat straw, chicken litter, horse manure, cottonseed meal, cottonseed hulls, sphagnum peat moss, gypsum, dolomitic lime, urea, and soybean oil. It is no wonder the roses flourish. This product is rather inexpensive and suits mulching requirements extremely well. It can be combined with shredded pine bark to increase bulk. A generous application can serve as winter protection, too. Upon the arrival of spring, the compost can be tilled into the soil for enrichment. Earthworms are attracted to it and perform their beneficial task of aerating and feeding the soil through excrement.

The wise rosarian has built a backyard composting operation. This is a convenient method of

supplying useful mulch inexpensively. Whatever is used in the operation be sure that it is aged properly and does not contain harmful ingredients. In using leaves, be sure these are properly shredded. Whole leaves tend to mat and restrict the passage of water and oxygen to the plant 's root system. As to the use of grass clippings, be sure these are aged and have not been sprayed with herbicides.

When applying mulch, be sure to expose the bud union of the plant, thereby allowing sunlight to reach it to activate the sprouting of basal breaks. Mulching does not completely eliminate the need for fertilizing. It simply supplements the feeding program. If handled properly, its presence will not interfere with fertilizing. Temporarily rake away the mulch to the drip line of the plant so that the fertilizer will reach the awaiting feeder roots. Be sure to rake it back after regular fertilizing is completed.

In addition to applying mushroom compost as mulching material, I cover the mound of compost with a layer of pine needles just prior to the arrival of winter. The mound is then increased in size to provide maximum insulation. The pine needles allow the compost to remain in place and prevent erosion during rainy periods. The needles also serve as added insulation. Their porous quality permits oxygen and water to reach the root system.

Yes, it is possible to raise roses without mulching. However, its application will greatly enhance the quality of flower and foliage. Give mulching a try and I am confident you will reap a harvest of blooms that are judged to be of blue-ribbon quality. Perhaps trophies may grace your mantle as well.

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