Using Mulch in the Landscape
Bob Ary
Extension Agent

Mulch is a protective covering spread over the soil surface in and around plants. Inorganic mulches include landscape fabric, rocks, gravel and shredded rubber. Shredded wood fiber and bark, pine needles and nuggets, and compost are examples of organic mulches.

There are many benefits to using mulch in the landscape. A 2-4 inch layer of mulch reduces the germination and growth of weeds and conserves soil moisture. Organic mulches improve physical and chemical of soil by preventing crusting over and improving the environment for beneficial microorganisms. The use of mulch also allows water to soak into the soil beneath while reducing erosion.

Mulching also provides an important benefit to shallow-rooted plants, including some tree. Dogwood and Redbud trees especially appreciate the cooler soil temperatures during the hottest part of the summer. The chances of mechanical injury to trees, shrubs and other plants from lawn mowers and weed trimmers are reduced with proper mulching.

Organic mulches may be purchased in bags or in bulk quantities. Bagged mulches will contain several cubic feet of mulch while bulk purchase is usually based on cubic yards. There are 27 cubic feet in a cubic yard. Calculating how much mulch would be needed to cover an area with a three inch layer, one cubic yard of mulch would cover 108 square feet.

The proper application of mulch will benefit plants while enhancing the landscape. The mulch layer should be no more than four inches deep and should not touch the trunks and stems of trees and shrubs. "Volcano" mulching may look impressive, but can have a harmful effect on plant roots and the trunk of trees.

The mulch that you choose may be based on purpose, personal preference, and cost. Organic mulches are more natural, and inorganic mulches are more decorative. Mulching may provide benefits to plants while reducing maintenance. Consider using mulch as a way bringing a more pleasing, manicured appearance to the home landscape.