Homes & Gardens

Town Tribune Weekly Guide To Fall Living

Should You Mulch Your Garden Before or After the First Frost?



Mulch is one of the most value-added things you can do to your landscape; it suppresses weeds, preserves soil moisture, keeps the soil temperature more even, and, as it breaks down, it adds nutrients to the soil.

Fall, when gardeners in climates with cold winters put their gardens to rest, is prime time for mulching. But does the exact timing make a difference?

This is what we asked landscaping experts: Whether it's better to apply mulch before or after the first frost. Here's what they said.

Should You Mulch Before or After the First Frost?

It depends on what you're mulching and why, but both mulching before and after frost have their benefits.

"Newly planted trees, shrubs, and perennials, plus broadleaf evergreens, benefit if their winter bed is warm before they go to sleep," says Alec Mayer, general manager of Lakeview Nurseries. "Established plants are fine with the bed being cooler before they sleep through the winter."

There is also the approach that the timing doesn't really matter.

"I am generally more interested in responding to the plants as they tell us the soil is too dry and often compacted, needing mulch, as opposed to worrying about a specific time of year to do it," says Donald Pell, landscape designer and owner of Donald Pell Gardens.

He says that he and his team usually mulch around plants at the time of installation and then every few years as needed.

"The plants let us know whether or not they need additional soil improvements," he says..

Benefits of Mulching Before Frost:

While there are no hard-and-fast rules about mulching before or after frost, some plants benefit from an earlier mulch cover because it helps retain soil moisture and moderate soil temperatures.

"This is especially beneficial to newly installed shrubs, trees, and perennials as they establish roots," Mayer says. "Broadleaf evergreens like holly, rhododendrons. and boxwood also benefit from this."

Benefits of Mulching After Frost:

While the first frost may kill tender plants, it does not mean that the soil has cooled significantly.

"Mulching after several frosts allows the soil to cool naturally before adding an insulating layer," Mayer says.

He explains that waiting to mulch until the soil has cooled helps maintain a more consistent soil temp through winter. This improved insulation also reduces the freeze-thaw cycles that can cause frost to heave your plants out of the soil.

Pell uses raw woodchips mixed with leaf compost to mulch woody plants, which requires its own timing.

"If you apply this type of mulch too early in the fall instead of waiting until after a few good frosts, plants could be prevented from beginning their dormancy," he says.

4 Other Tips for Fall Garden Care

Give your garden its best chance of success next year with these expert tips for fall care.

Leave the Leaves:

Only clear areas like lawn and walkways, but otherwise, leave the leaves.

"Don't shred or burn those leaves. Firefly babies are using those leaves to sleep through the winter, and the fireflies will give you a show next season if you do," Mayer says.

Remove Diseased Plants:

Any plants that are diseased should be thoroughly removed and disposed of in the trash since pathogens can survive in plant debris. A prime example is peonies, which tend to be covered in powdery mildew by the end of the season.

Let Plants Stand for Winter Interest and Wildlife:

Not all perennials have to be neatly cut back in the fall.

"For some herbaceous plants, we wait until the following spring to cut them back because their rich textures and colors are highly prized in the winter landscape," Pell says.

Letting perennials stand also provides food and shelter for wildlife. For example, goldfinches, cardinals, chickadees, and other non-migratory birds seek out the attractive seedheads of black-eyed Susans.

Protect Woody Plants Against Predators:

In the winter, especially if there is a snow cover, food is scarce, and deer, rabbits, and other critters will happily eat anything they can find. Make sure to protect tender young trees and shrubs with tree tubes or wire cages.

Why Some Gardeners Put Straw Over Their Gardens in Fall and When You Should Try It



Even after the growing season has come to a close, there are plenty of things you can do to help protect your garden heading into the winter, from soil testing to thorough watering.

Another helpful task to prioritize? Straw mulching. It can be the ideal organic mulch to use on your plants, but doing a bit of research beforehand can help you avoid common mulching mistakes.

Here's everything you need to know about using straw mulch in your garden, and why fall is the time to try it.

What Is Straw Mulching?

Straw mulching is the process of adding mulch made from by-products of grain plants—such as oats, soybeans, and wheat1—to gardens. Once mulch is applied over plants, it's adept at retaining moisture and enriching soil.

Straw mulch is a particularly good fit for strawberry beds and vegetable gardens. It's also typically an inexpensive, easy-to-find option, usually available at local gardening centers and home improvement stores.

Why Fall Is a Good Time for Straw Mulching:

When used on cool-weather crops like broccoli and cabbage, it can help prevent bolting and extend the vegetables' growing time. Vegetable gardens don't have plant roots anchoring the soil during winter, so extra protection from mulch can play a major role in maintaining soil health.

Straw mulch can also help protect roses, perennials, and other frost-tender plants during winter.

What to Know When Straw Mulching in the Garden:

When shopping for straw mulch, prioritize certified seed and weed-free products, since it can be difficult to remove all the grain seeds during processing and a few seeds can sprout unless the soil is treated ahead of time.

It's also important to avoid straw mulch that hails from a field treated with herbicides, since this can carry over to edible plants.

Once you've mulched your garden, make sure to wrap or cover unused straw mulch in a dry space. Otherwise, rodents like mice and squirrels1 will likely attempt to use it as nest material and can eventually move inside your home.

How to Use Straw Mulch in Your Garden During Fall:

Here's how to apply straw mulch in your yard this fall, depending on where you're mulching it.

Fruit and Vegetable Gardens

After cleaning up old plant material in your vegetable and/or fruit gardens, apply a two-inch layer of mulch by hand.

Landscape

Add 3 to 4 inches of straw mulch to landscape plants like roses, ornamental shrubs, and hydrangeas and remove it in the spring. If your plant is particularly vulnerable, consider adding a wire cage around it.



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