

# Orlando Sentinel

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## Mulch Types: Advantages vs. Disadvantages

### Cover all the bases when choosing right mulch

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If you're one who says mulch is just mulch, no matter what you lay on the ground, think again. With the proliferation of mulch choices on the market, consider these facts about organic and inorganic products before you buy.

#### *Organic Mulches*

##### **Cypress**

Advantages:

Attractive-looking, inexpensive and long-lasting. Chips are easy to apply.

Disadvantages:

Gardening experts with Florida Yards & Neighborhoods, a program of the Florida Cooperative Extension Service, do not recommend using this type of mulch because its harvest depletes cypress wetlands.

Average cost:

\$1.49 per 2-cubic-foot bag, \$19 per cubic yard.

##### **Pine bark**

Advantages:

Slow to decompose and generally lasts a year or more. Bark can be bought in different sizes, ranging from a fine grind to 2-inch nuggets.

Disadvantages:

Large chunks can float away from the mulched surface. Mulch can lower soil pH slightly.

Average cost:

\$2.29 per 2-cubic-foot bag, \$16 per cubic yard; pine chips, \$18 per cubic yard.

##### **Municipal tree trimmings**

Advantages:

Generally free to the public and can be picked up from local landfills.

Disadvantages:

This type of mulch can decompose rapidly because of sawdust content in the mulch, and it may contain weed seed. If there's a lot of fresh organic matter in the mulch, the area should be supplemented with fertilizer.

Average cost:

Free.

## **Waste wood**

**Advantages:** Popularly called red mulch. It's long-lasting and available in a variety of colors. The chips are dyed to match pine, hardwood, cypress or other mulch products. Wood chips don't blow away easily.

**Disadvantages:**

While some manufacturers use only indigenous hardwoods, others mix a variety of woods along with construction debris that might include pressure-treated lumber. This material also decomposes faster than bark and requires the addition of nitrogen fertilizer.

**Average cost:**

\$2.49 per 2-cubic-foot bag, \$20 per cubic yard.

## **Melaleuca**

**Advantages:** Excellent mulch because of its long-lasting qualities. This mulch also helps with the eradication of this invasive tree. Laboratory tests show termites don't like melaleuca. The product is sold under the name Florimulch.

**Disadvantages:**

Hard to find locally. Forestry Resources in Fort Myers produces and sells this mulch product. Details: 239-334-7343.

**Average cost:**

\$2 per 2-cubic-foot bag, \$16 per cubic yard.

## **Yard waste (grass clippings, leaves, pine needles)**

**Advantages:**

Free and adds nutrients to the soil. Grass clippings should be cut before seeds have ripened and should be applied dry. Pine needles are good for acid-loving plants, such as azaleas, gardenias and hydrangeas.

**Disadvantages:**

Can spread weed seeds; not as uniformly attractive as other mulches.

**Average cost:**

Free

## **Homemade compost**

**Advantages:**

It's full of nutrients that are beneficial to plants.

**Disadvantages:**

It takes time for compost materials to decompose and be ready for use; but once in use, compost decomposes faster than pine bark, cypress and wood chips.

**Average cost:**

Free.

## **Straw**

**Advantages:**

Feed-quality hay is popular in gardens, inexpensive and can be tilled into garden beds after harvest.

**Disadvantages:**

Unattractive in ornamental landscape beds.

**Average cost:**

\$4.85 per bale.

**Eucalyptus****Advantages:**

Eucalyptus oil reportedly repels termites, fleas, ticks and insects. Mulch is aromatic and maintains soil pH. The redwood color deepens with exposure to sunlight. American-Eucalyptus Corp. sells shredded and fiber mulch. This mulch is propagated and regenerated on managed plantations.

**Disadvantages:**

Not sold locally; will be available in the Orlando area in 2003.

**Average cost:**

American-Eucalyptus Corp. sells a 2-cubic-foot bag for \$3.97; 3-cubic foot bag, for \$4.97; 1-800-590-0255.

***Inorganic Mulches***

Inorganic materials don't add nutrients to soil and do not decompose readily.

**Landscape fabrics****Advantages:**

Plastic covers are laid over the soil surface to hold in moisture and prevent weed growth. Usually top-dressed with another mulch. Some products are porous.

**Disadvantages:**

If the product isn't porous, plant roots can suffocate and rot.

**Average cost:**

\$20 per 6-by-50-foot roll.

**Recycled rubber tires****Advantages:**

The material is considered permanent because it doesn't decompose or blow or wash away. Insects avoid this material, and it doesn't sink into the ground like gravel or rocks. Comes in many colors.

**Disadvantages:**

Some products give off a strong odor. It's hard to find locally.

**Average cost:**

\$9 per 30-pound bag, which covers 7 1/2 square feet, 2 inches deep. American Rubber Technologies of Jacksonville sells this product in small and large quantities. Details: 904-786-5200 or americanrubber.com.

**Stone, pebbles, gravel****Advantages:**

Used for color, texture and stability. Creates a permanent cover. All rocks are fire-resistant. These products don't break down in the soil.

Disadvantages:

Smaller pebbles may sink into the soil after time. Some rocks are hard to keep clean. Moving this type of mulch is heavy work.

Average cost:

White river gravel in 1/4 to 1/2-inch pieces in a 1/2-cubic-foot bag sells for \$2.59. One 1/2-cubic-foot bag of red lava rock is \$2.99. White river rock in 1- to 2-inch sizes in a 1/2-cubic-foot bag is \$2.99. Larger quantities and different varieties of decorative rock are available from specialty ground-cover companies.

SOURCES: Ohio State University, Florida Yards & Neighborhoods fact sheet, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences and Greg Stake at Florida Garden Products, Oviedo.

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