

## Comparison of Garden Mulch Materials for Weed Control

Material	Area	Advantages	Disadvantages
Bark products	Beds, paths	Come in several sizes – medium and coarse grades best for weed control; can be slow to decompose; attractive	Somewhat expensive; small sizes blow away in windy areas; can migrate onto pavement areas
Black plastic	Beds	Easy to apply; lay on soil, cut slits, insert seeds or plants; use at least 6-mil grade for maximum longevity; irrigate soil before laying plastic	Must be weighted down; weakened by ultraviolet sun rays, breaks down in one season; unattractive; somewhat expensive; roots of plants develop in the layer beneath plastic, so they are poorly anchored and susceptible to drought; nonrecyclable.
Building/roofing paper	Paths	Durable and long-lasting (use 80-lb grade); tolerates some foot traffic; warms soil	Expensive; somewhat unattractive (cover with bark or gravel to improve appearance); some types contain asphalt
Cardboard, Newspaper	Beds, Paths	Inexpensive, readily available, use 3 to 6 sheets thick	Must be weighted down; unattractive; potential habitat for slugs; inks may contain PCBs which are toxic to plants
Carpet pieces	Paths	Free or inexpensive; can be rolled up for tillage or planting; retains moisture; if laid with underside up, has brown earthy appearance; decomposes slowly	May become eventual disposal problem; can attract slugs and ants
Compost	Beds	Improves soil as it decomposes; free if homemade; attractive	Decomposes rapidly
Gravel, crushed stone	Paths	Decorative; packs densely to exclude light; can be used to cover plastic or paper	Expensive; can reflect excessive amounts of heat onto plants (use dark colors to reduce heat); semi-permanent, difficult to move
Leafmold	Beds	Free, available, attractive	Can be used only with plants suited to acid soils; decomposes rapidly
Pine needles	Beds, paths	Free, attractive; good on paths since leaching stops most plant growth	On beds can only be used with plants suited to acid soils; can be fire hazard when dry
Sawdust	Beds, paths	Free or inexpensive; excellent on paths since it depletes soil nitrogen, making weed growth difficult	Must be stabilized with nitrogen when used on beds; decomposes fairly rapidly; blows away in windy areas unless kept wet; unstabilized sawdust should not be buried
Straw/hay	Beds, paths	Inexpensive; enriches soil as it decomposes; lightweight, easy to apply; pleasant to walk on	Can contain weed seeds; not easy to find in urban areas; unstable in wind; must be stabilized with nitrogen; fire hazard if dry
Wood chips	Beds, paths	Slow to decompose; pack well to exclude light from soil; free from tree-care companies	Can contain weed seeds; can be expensive to purchase; can be fire hazard; can migrate unless confined by retaining board
Woven weed mats	Beds, paths	Allows water and air to penetrate soil but screen out light; available from nurseries	Expensive if used on a large garden but worth the cost for long-term weed control