

Much about Mulch!

You're probably familiar with the great benefits associated with using mulch correctly: weed suppression, moisture conservation, reduced soil pH, and aesthetics.

Correct mulch application means using 2-3 inches of mulch spread to the drip line of trees and plants (or better yet, beyond) and kept away from trunks and stems.

There are many different types of mulch to choose from, and there is certainly no one correct type of mulch. I suggest choosing the most sustainable option available to you, which you can determine by asking the following questions:

- **Does the product have viable weed seed?** Mulch should be composted in order to kill weed seeds, especially if they are made of invasive or unknown species. Otherwise, the benefit of weed reduction is eliminated.
- **Where did this mulch come from?** The further it's transported, the less sustainable it is.
- **Is it a waste or recycled product?** Using materials that aren't otherwise useful, or would end up in landfills, is a responsible choice. Non-sustainable harvesting of trees (as is the case with some cypress) for mulch removes valuable trees from our ecosystems and results in reduced tree canopy that is available to provide habitat for wildlife, remove pollution, and clean water.
- **What species does it contain?** Just as with the food you eat, you want to know what type of tree you are consuming through your landscape practices.
- **Has it been dyed?** Most mulch dyes have been tested and proven to be non-toxic, but some feel that dyed mulches give a less natural look to the landscape.
- **Does it contain debris such as pressure-treated wood?** Some of the dyed mulches contain pressure-treated lumber, which may leach arsenic into soils. I personally avoid all dyed mulches for this among other reasons.
- **Is it attractive to you? What does it cost?** Don't forget the human components of sustainability. If you don't like it or can't afford it, it isn't sustainable.

There are many mulch options. **Cypress Mulch** is often composed of our native cypress trees. **Pine Bark** is harvested from trees that are going to be processed for other products. **Pine Straw** is the needles of pine trees and is harvested from Pines being grown for other purposes. **Red Mulch** is a type of **Recycled Mulch**, which is composed of materials that might otherwise go to landfills and are shredded, nails and other metals removed, and usually dyed.

Eucalyptus Mulch is composed of the fast-growing Eucalyptus tree. Its production does require the harvesting of whole trees, but is generally more sustainable than Cypress mulch because stands of Eucalyptus are planted strictly for mulch and then replanted. Native habitats aren't being destroyed. **Melaleuca Mulch** is a great choice. As you probably know, Melaleuca trees are exotic invasives that are disrupting natural ecosystems here in Florida. Melaleuca mulch is a way to "take lemons and make lemonade" by harvesting the trees and composting them to kill their seeds. Mulch from **non-plant sources** include rocks, pebbles, or shells and can be interesting additions to the landscape. Finally, **Yard Waste Mulch** is a mixture of plant and grass trimmings, leaves, and chipped wood. You can either apply yard waste directly or compost the materials first. Some plants, such as Bamboo and Pines, are natural

mulch-makers and create an endless supply of nice, fresh mulch. Solid waste facilities, such as ours here in Palm Beach County, compost yard waste and provide the finished product, free of charge to residents.

At home, I use a combination of composted yard waste and Melaleuca mulch. I'm also lucky to have Bamboo plants that create nice, natural mulch in two corners of my yard. I highly recommend these options as they are sustainable, attractive and inexpensive. These might or might not be the perfect choices for you. Ask the questions suggested above and you can feel good about making a sustainable mulch selection for your landscape.