

# After Pruning: Mulching

by Luis Desamero

Mulching is one the best things you can do for your rose garden. By definition, mulching is simply the spreading of a protective covering around the rosebushes and on top of the surrounding soil. The benefits are tremendous. It prevents moisture from evaporating, stunts weed growth, improves soil structure, maintains an even soil temperature during the summer months and gives the landscape a handsome well-groomed look.

## APPLICATION

It is best to apply the mulch after pruning, although it can be used at any time during the year. One of reasons for applying mulch after pruning is the ability to protect the bud union from dehydration after planting. Using finer grade mulch, the layer should be thinner than that applied for coarser materials such as redwood bark (2- to 3-inches deep.)

Organic mulches require replenishment on an annual basis since the previous year's application will have decomposed and reduced in thickness as the humus is worked into the soil. It is this decomposition that is most beneficial to soil fertility, increasing the Cation Exchange Capacity (CEC), a common soil test criterion.

## TYPES OF MULCH

The available mulch materials can be divided into two categories. Organic - grass clippings, wood chips (particularly redwood based), and cocoa hulls. They act as a thermal barrier to temperature drops or increases. But best of all they decompose to humus providing nutrients to the soil as well improve the fertility with time. Earthworms are great movers of this organic compost into the soil around the roots. Inorganic - stones, gravel, shredded rubber. These materials have opposite properties keeping the soil warmer in summer and cooler in winter. While they can reduce weeds they do not improve soil fertility and are often used for aesthetic appeal.

## THE ORGANIC MULCHES



One of the best products around in Southern Californian nurseries is "Bark Nuggets" by Earthgro. These small redwood bark nuggets are great for rosebeds, decaying in several seasons before needing replenishment; and relatively inexpensive too!

\* Cocoa Bean Hulls are the products of making chocolate so if you lived near Hershey, PA you would be in mulch heaven! They provide a very neat looking dressing when laid down about 1 inch thick. (For dog owners do not let them eat the hulls as they toxic to them.)

\* Grass Clippings are the least expensive of the mulches available especially if you have large lawns. Do not use clippings treated with a herbicide. Let the clippings mature for over several months before use. It is recommended that you dig in last year's application before applying the new layers.

\* Pine Needles are abundantly available in the South where they are harvested, baled and sold commercially through the USA. The all evergreen needles provide an excellent mulch 1-2 inch layer for your rose beds.

\* Environmulch is a term used to describe recycled wood products such as pallets, etc. The material is first shredded and then usually dyed to make a colorful mulch. Their distinct advantage is that they last a lot longer than the

wood chip varieties.

\* Eucalyprus has gained popularity in the West where tress are abundant. This wood mulch holds its attractive color and can last over several years.

\* Shredded Leaves from oak and maple tress can make a suitable mulch when passed through a mower.

\* Wood Chips derived from redwood as a by-product are the top choice for they also provide a weed barrier at the same time. The thickness of the applied layer should be 3-inches deep. The attractive look of beds mulched with wood chips is by far the best looking appearance.

## THE INORGANIC MULCHES

\* Various small stones & gravel are often chosen mainly for their aesthetic appeal based on color and uniformity. Their most attractive asset is that they do not degrade and one application can last for years. They are often used in combination with a weed barrier underneath. The spun fabric permits air and water to pass freely while providing the best weed protection of all materials.