

Low-Cost Mulching Options for Weed Control and Soil Health



Mulching is a key part of gardening. Mulching offers soil improvement which makes everything in your garden grow better. It is also one of the most versatile and cost-effective solutions for curbing weed growth in a garden. This guide explores the significance of mulching, its broader benefits, and various low-cost mulching options for reaping the benefits without adding expenses.

Why Mulching Matters for Weed Control and Soil Health

There are many different reasons to utilize low-cost mulching in your garden. The two key benefits are weed control and soil health.

Low-Cost Mulching for Weed Control

Mulching serves as a formidable defense against weeds by creating a physical barrier that suppresses weed growth. Mulch smothers weed seeds. Moreover, it hinders the weeds and their seeds from access to light. Therefore, mulch effectively reduces the emergence and proliferation of weeds. This minimizes the need for constant manual weeding. Additionally, it reduces any need for more costly forms of weed control.

Low-Cost Mulching for Soil Health

Mulch also acts as a protective layer over the soil. It shields the soil from erosion caused by wind or water. It regulates soil temperature, preserving moisture levels by reducing evaporation and preventing soil compaction. Over time, organic mulches break down, enriching the soil with essential nutrients and improving its structure. It is one of the best things that you can do to improve the health of your garden overall. And it doesn't have to cost much.

Other Benefits of Mulching

These two benefits are key to why you want to consider low-cost mulching. However, there are other [benefits of mulching](#) as well.

- Enhancement of biodiversity by supporting diverse soil microorganisms
- Reduced need for frequent watering
- Improvement of nutrient availability as organic mulches decompose
- Prevention of soil splash, keeping plants clean and disease-free
- Aesthetic enhancement by providing a neat appearance to garden beds
- Protection of delicate plant roots from extreme temperature fluctuations

- Creation of a natural habitat for beneficial insects and organisms
- Sound insulation by reducing noise levels in urban or noisy environments
- Prevention of fruit and vegetable spoilage by keeping produce off the ground
- Prevention of erosion on slopes and hillsides, preserving the landscape
- Encouragement of earthworm activity
- Reduction in the spread of certain plant diseases by maintaining soil hygiene

Low-Cost Mulching Options for Weed Control and Soil Health

Generally, the [cost of mulch](#) can vary based on factors such as the material used, availability, and the region where it's purchased. Mulches made from specific hardwood barks or exotic woods can be more expensive due to their limited availability or processing costs. You can spend a lot of money on mulch if you want to go that route. For example, you can buy specialty mulches such as cocoa mulch, rubber mulch, or dyed mulch. However, if you're looking for low-cost mulching options, you don't have to look far. There are so many great options.

Organic Mulch Options

Several low-cost organic mulch options are effective for gardens and landscapes. You probably already have them in your yard or garden. Alternatively, you can typically get them at a low cost. Examples include:

Wood Chips / Bark

These organic materials slowly decompose, enriching the soil with organic matter. They are very effective for weed suppression as well as for moisture retention. You can often

get the material free or at a low cost from tree trimming services.

Leaves

You probably already have plenty of free leaves, especially if you live in a place where the leaves fall during fall. Free. This organic material provides insulation and retains moisture. You can spread out or shred the leaves for faster decomposition.

Pine Needles

Often free for collection in areas with pine trees, this option provides a lightweight and long-lasting mulch. Their acidic nature benefits acid-loving plants like azaleas or blueberries. That's a point you want to consider; different organic mulches offer different benefits for different plants.

Grass Clippings

This option is high in nitrogen, providing nutrients as it decomposes. Spread thin layers of grass clippings to prevent matting and odor. If you live in a grassy area, this is a free option.

Straw/Hay

Unless you happen to live on a farm, this might not be a free option. However, it's typically affordable. Straw/ hay are available in bales at garden centers or farm supply stores. It's an effective mulch for weed suppression and moisture retention. And it adds organic matter to improve the soil as it decomposes.

Livestock Manure

This option adds nutrients and improves soil structure when aged or composted properly. It can be sourced from local farms or stables for free or cheap.

Recycled Materials

In addition to organic materials for mulch, you can use recycled materials. And some of these (like coffee grounds/compost) fall into both categories.

Newspaper / Cardboard / Shredded Paper

Layer newspapers or cardboard sheets over the soil. You can combine this with any of the organic mulch options above to easily keep them in place. This technique suffocates weeds while breaking down over time.

Cloth / Fabric Scraps

Old fabric pieces or burlap sacks serve as effective weed barriers. Lay them over the soil and cover them with organic mulch for added insulation.

Compost

Homemade compost from kitchen scraps and yard waste can be one of the best low-cost mulching options you'll find. It is rich in nutrients, promotes soil health, and aids plant growth.

Coffee Grounds

Often available for free from local coffee shops or your own kitchen remnants, coffee grounds are high in nitrogen, which is beneficial for soil and plants. They can be used as mulch alone or incorporated into compost.

Natural Ground Covers

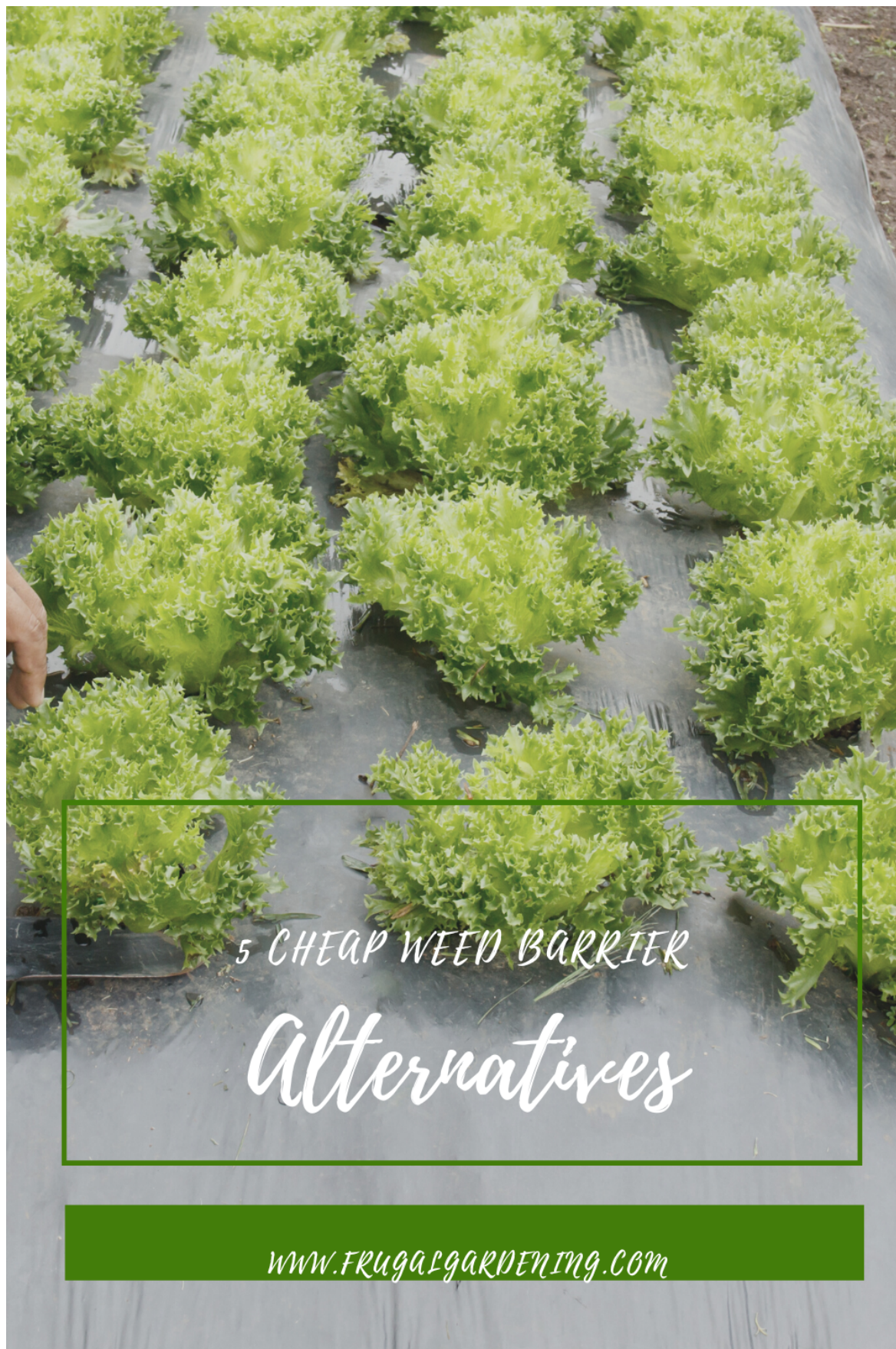
You can also plant natural ground covers in your garden to add beauty while adding mulch. Options like clover, vetch, or even certain types of low-growing herbs serve as living mulches, providing numerous benefits to gardens. These ground covers act as living carpets, suppressing weed growth, retaining moisture, and protecting soil from erosion. Their root systems

enhance soil structure, fostering a healthier environment for plant roots while reducing the need for additional mulch. Additionally, these ground covers often require minimal maintenance, making them a cost-effective and sustainable choice for gardeners aiming to improve soil health and curb weed growth without hefty expenses.

Read More:

- [Using Shredded Paper as Garden Mulch](#)
 - [Top 13 Benefits of Using Rice Hulls in Gardens](#)
 - [5 Ways to Reduce Water Usage in the Garden](#)
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5 Cheap Weed Barrier Alternatives



5 CHEAP WEED BARRIER

Alternatives

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I'm very forgiving when it comes to weeds. But because I use the square foot gardening method and garden in raised beds, I rarely have to deal with many invading plants. Still, there

are some spots in my garden when I need to keep [weeds](#) out. Since landscaping fabric is pricey, I stick to these cheap weed barrier alternatives instead.

Cheap Weed Barrier Alternatives

Here are some of my favorite cheap weed barrier alternatives—some won't even cost you a dime!

What's a weed barrier, you ask? Weed barriers are often placed at the bottom of a garden box or bed. After you place the barrier, you pile on the dirt, plant your seeds or starts, and you're all set. The barrier ensures that weeds and grabby nearby tree roots don't invade your garden and steal nutrients.

But weed barriers, especially landscape fabric, can be expensive. So here are a few frugal ways to keep out weeds without hurting your wallet.

Cardboard

When I started my current garden, I was so excited to add dirt to my brand-new raised beds that I completely forgot to add a weed barrier layer. Fast forward a year or two, and my plants ended up battling nearby cedar roots for nutrients.

What a disaster!

Over time, as the dirt level decreased, I decided to add a layer of cardboard and start from scratch with a new batch of soil, compost, and vermiculite. Since then, I've had way fewer problems with nutrient deficiencies. I also learned a valuable lesson: always use a weed barrier!

Plus, using cardboard is a great way to get rid of boxes piling up in your house. If your recycling bin can't handle the volume of packages you receive in the mail, consider using that cardboard in the garden. Ideally, you'll add a few layers

for good measure.

Mulch

If you don't have access to cardboard or can't afford landscape fabric, [mulch](#) is a great way to keep weeds at bay. My favorite type of mulch is straw or coco coir. By suffocating weed seed, mulch ensures your plants get all the light and nutrients.

If you want free mulch, consider asking nearby farms if they have any extra straw they can give away. Or, shred fallen autumnal leaves for mulch. Leaf mold is both a free and eco-friendly mulch!

Newspaper

Another cheap weed barrier alternative is newspaper. Of course, you'll need to be getting the newspaper for this to be a cheap solution. You wouldn't want to have to subscribe just to use the weekly news report as a weed barrier in the garden.

(But I'm strongly for supporting local journalism enterprises! So if you're on the fence about subscribing, you should know that you can indeed use newspaper as mulch and a weed barrier.

Rocks

When I moved into my home, the front yard garden was filled with small rocks. I hated them with a passion. I tried hard to remove them, but I quickly realized that doing so was going to be harder than I thought. Since then, I've used the tiny rocks as a weed barrier for smaller garden areas. What I like about rocks as a weed barrier is that they are great for improving drainage in an area that's otherwise prone to getting waterlogged.

If you have an abundance of gravel from a landscaping project, consider using it as a bottom layer for your garden beds. If

you use rocks, though, make sure you're sure about your garden's placement. They're a pain to remove!

Burlap

Burlap is a little pricier than the other options on this list, but it's more eco-friendly than landscaping fabric. And, if you know someone who has recently had a shabby-chic wedding, ask them if you can have their leftover burlap tablecloths. [Order Burlap here](#).

Should You Use Diesel To Kill Weeds?



SHOULD YOU
Use Diesel To
Kill Weeds?

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Should you use diesel to kill weeds? Short answer: Nope.

Weeds can be annoying. They compete with other plants for

nutrients and can turn a pretty, organized garden into a patchy mess. Still, I'll continue to stand up for weeds. Some of the plants we consider weeds are actually beneficial. They offer up food to hungry pollinators and beneficial bugs. True weeds are plants that have been introduced to an environment in which they have no natural competitors or predators. That means they grow unchecked and sometimes harm habitats and ecosystems.

BUT. Even with true weeds, I'm wildly hesitant to recommend something toxic like diesel. As someone who tries to do their best to grow organically, the thought of using diesel anywhere near my garden fills me with dread.

Can you use diesel to kill weeds?

Some people might recommend that you use diesel to kill stubborn weeds. This tactic is often recommended for lawns littered with weeds. I don't think we should be wasting valuable resources on curating green lawns that have no purpose. Second, even if you're using it on a non-edible surface, know that diesel is highly toxic and can contaminate nearby areas.

If you're growing anything [edible](#), stay away from toxic substances like diesel.

You also run the risk of harming animals and beneficial [insects](#) like bees and butterflies. With bee and pollinator populations on the decline, it seems incredibly risky and irresponsible to use a toxic substance just to get rid of a few weeds.

"But my weed problem is terrible, and I heard I could use diesel to fix it!"

There are plenty of other ways to tackle pesky weeds. Getting rid of weeds isn't easy, but if you want a hobby to replace your leisurely walk in the park, gardening might be the wrong

choice. Additionally, diesel is pricey and flammable! You'll do better by spending your money on something else for the garden.

Gardening is an approachable hobby because it's simple to get started with some dirt and some seeds. But to turn a landscape around involves a lot of work. You can be a frugal gardener, but any kind of digging in the dirt requires some form of effort.

Other ways to get rid of weeds

If you can't use diesel to kill weeds, what else can you do?

Here are a few ways to [get rid of weeds](#) in an environmentally friendly manner:

- **Mulch.** My favorite way to suppress weeds is mulch. It not only suffocates most weeds but also helps beautify beds and provides a uniform blank slate.
- **Stop over-digging and tilling.** Most weed seeds sit beneath the surface and won't sprout unless exposed to sun and moisture. Minimize digging and tilling to prevent unearthing hidden weed seeds.
- **Target your watering efforts.** Get rid of the sprinkler. It's a waste of water and money. Use targeted irrigation systems to get water to your plants. No desire to budget to set up an irrigation system? When you water by hand, don't water where there are no plants. Empty spaces don't need moisture! All you'll do is help the weeds along.

Read More

[Yes, you can garden for free](#)

[Ten ways to get free plants for your garden](#)

[How to get free plants](#)

How to Use Baking Soda for Weed Control



I've dealt with some nasty weeds in my day. I've also tried a lot of methods to get rid of said [weeds](#). A lot of those so-called "tried-and-true" methods are actually bogus. Like so

many gardening pieces of wisdom, a lot of weed control tricks aren't really useful. What about baking soda for weed control? Does it work?

Baking soda's many uses

I *always* have a box of baking soda in my cupboard—usually two, in fact. Baking soda has many uses. It's a frequent baking ingredient. It's great for sopping up urine stains (something I have to deal with sometimes as a dog owner) and it deodorizes almost like magic. I also always have a box in the fridge to deal with stubborn smells that permeate from containers of leftovers.

But does it work for killing weeds? Can you use baking soda for weed control?

Baking soda in the garden

I have a love-hate relationship with weeds. I genuinely believe that some weeds are lovely. Dandelions, for instance, are a treat and I love how they attract dozens of bees to my garden. Invasive vines, on the other hand? Kill them with fire! Or maybe baking soda?

Here's the deal. Baking soda is not a magic weed killer. Don't believe the hype. It contains sodium, which will surely kill weeds if you pile on the stuff. But, salt is also going to harm other green living things around your garden. Salt can also leech into your soil and can cause harmful runoff.

TLDR: It works but it can also cause problems.

It seems like a harmless substance, but I don't recommend it for use in the garden. There are plenty of better ways to deal with weeds.

Baking soda alternatives

Here are a few alternatives to using baking soda for weed control.

- **Landscape fabric.** Prepare beds with landscape fabric to prevent weeds from popping up in the first place.
- **Plastic mulch.** Plastic mulch is another easy-to-use alternative that can easily suffocate weeds.
- **Organic mulch.** Good ole' organic mulches like wood chips and straw can help prevent weed growth. If you have a bed infested with weeds, though, don't use [mulch](#) until you've pulled out most of the invading plants.
- **Your hands.** If you're dealing with a minor weed infestation, just use your hands or a trowel to dig the weeds up by the roots. Remember to dig up the *whole* plant or else it'll pop up again.
- **Cardboard.** Lay down cardboard before planting to prevent weeds from growing back.
- **Get some chickens.** Chickens won't selectively pick out weeds for you but they will eat the remnants that you've pulled up. That way, you won't have to find a way to dispose of them.

Quick tip: Never toss weeds into your household compost. You can contaminate your garden this way!

While I have you here: if you *really* hate those dandelions. I suggest not letting them go to waste. Pick them and use them to make tea.

5 Ways to Banish Weeds Without Breaking the Bank



I've got a little bit more work to do than usual this spring because of the mistakes I made when installing my raised beds five years ago. I was eager to get started and didn't think I'd have issues with weeds since my beds were waist-high. I assumed I'd have to deal with the occasional weed, but in my haste, I never thought about what the roots of nearby cedars might do to my precious growing space. My initial error meant I needed to come up with cheap ways to banish weeds.

Dealing with Weeds in my Garden

Fast-forward to last season, when I dealt with nutrient deficiencies. I was left scratching my head. What was going on? Why was my soil quality so poor? I spent plenty of time amending the soil each season and made sure to add compost and never over-fertilize. What was I doing wrong? Why was one bed

more affected than another? It turns out the cedar hedge roots that border my garden were infiltrating one of my garden beds (the one closest to the hedges). I needed to find a quick solution to a problem that would only get worse over time.

First, we trimmed back the hedges significantly, and then I got to work devising a plan to create a whole new layer of healthy soil. Last fall, my husband helped me cover the existing earth with leftover garden stones (cracked and broken and no longer of use in the yard). We layered stones, dead leaves, and cardboard, leaving a few inches that would need to be filled with soil mix in the spring. These past few weeks, I've slowly been topping up the raised beds with soil and compost. Here's hoping I don't encounter any issues this season! I trust I've rectified my mistake.

Don't make the same error! Banish weeds and tree roots with the following tips:

Use Elevated Planters or Containers

Are you worried about tree roots getting into your raised planters? Don't set them right on the ground. Build elevated, table-top planters or use movable [containers](#) to grow edibles and ornamentals.

Put Down Cardboard

Cardboard will eventually break down, but it's a useful tool for [blocking out pesky weeds](#) like dandelions that seem to pop back up each year without a care in the world.

Use the SFG Method

If you're looking for a planting method that limits weeds, try the square foot gardening method. The close spacing between plants acts as a kind of mulching mechanism to block out weed growth. It's also super easy to spot weeds in an SFG plot

because the invader is clearly the odd one out.

Mulch, Mulch, Mulch

Mulch with wood chips, [coco coir](#), straw, leaf mold, or shredded paper to conserve moisture and eliminate weed growth around your plants. Careful, don't mulch too much. Too-thick a layer of mulch can suffocate plant roots in addition to weeds.

Lay Down Newspaper

Don't have cardboard boxes lying around and need a cheap, easily accessible alternative? Use shredded newspaper as mulch or sheets of newspaper to block out weeds when starting a new garden bed.