

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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Using Shredded Paper As Garden Mulch



USING SHREPPED PAPER

As Garden
Mulch

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Should you use shredded paper as garden mulch? Normally, I spend my time telling you that the [advice you've heard countless times is bogus](#). But using shredded paper in your

garden is actually a great idea.

What is mulch?

[Mulch](#) is a substance added to the garden that helps soil retain moisture and stay cool. It also keeps weeds away and can prevent frost damage in the winter. Organic mulches break down and can eventually improve the condition and nutrient composition of the soil. Non-organic mulches, like plastic mulch, can't break down but can often be reused year after year.

Other things you can use for mulch include:

- wood chips
- leaves
- straw
- coco coir
- compost
- plastic

And yes, you can use shredded paper as mulch! One huge benefit of paper mulch is that it's FREE and super easy to make. If you regularly use a paper shredder, emptying the canister and using the remnants in your garden is a good way to recycle them since [most recycling plants don't accept shredded paper](#).

How to use shredded paper as mulch

The main task you need to complete before using paper as mulch is shredding. You can use a paper shredder to rip the paper into pieces or do it by hand.

If you need to make a lot of paper mulch and don't have a shredder, try getting the family involved in shredding paper.

Be careful when selecting the paper you'll be shredding. Anything thick and glossy—like pages in a color magazine—contains heavy metals that can leach out into the

soil. But newsprint and regular printer paper are generally safe to use as mulch.

As with any kind of mulch, cutting it into small pieces is key. Plus, if you tried to stick sheets of paper over the soil, they'd quickly end up blown elsewhere.

After applying shredded paper to your garden, dampen it with water to keep it from flying all over the place.

Did you know that you can also add shredded paper to your compost bin? If you have plenty of mulch and not enough room in your recycling bin, shredded paper can go into the compost and takes about 2 to 6 weeks to break down. It's considered a "brown" ingredient, so if you drop a lot of shredded paper into your bin, make sure to balance it out with "green" ingredients like grass clippings.

7 Places Where You Can Get Free Mulch



7 PLACES WHERE YOU CAN
Get Free Mulch

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Mulch is one of the most useful tools for gardeners. It's especially helpful at a time when the weather is unpredictable. We've begun to see the drastic effects of

climate change in earnest, namely hotter summers. And while many garden plants love warm weather, there's a point where the heat becomes unbearable—even for heat-loving plants like tomatoes and peppers. Mulch is a multi-purpose substance that can help gardeners conserve moisture, control soil temperatures, and improve soil consistency.

But where do you actually get mulch? Sure, you can buy bags of mulch from a garden center, but are there ways to get mulch for free?

The answer: Absolutely!

How to get free mulch

The first strategy is to make your own mulch. Free sources of mulch around the home include:

- Leaves
- Grass clippings
- Pine needles
- [Compost](#)
- Straw

Other sources for free mulch

Other places where you can get free mulch include:

- **Arborists:** These are the people who provide tree care services around town. When they cut down trees or branches, they'll usually turn pieces into mulch and take that to a landfill for disposal. There's no guarantee that they'll share the stuff with you for free, but you can ask politely! Just don't expect it to arrive neatly bagged. Make sure you have a spot on your property to accommodate a truckload of dumped wood mulch.
- **Local municipalities:** Many cities have yearly environment days to spread awareness about earth-

friendly activities. Some cities, for instance, offer free compost to interested citizens. Other towns may have garden products like [compost](#) or other types of mulch available upon request. Not sure if your city offers any garden supplies for free? Just ask!

- **Neighbors:** Not everyone is a gardener, but your neighbors may have many useful garden amendments lying around their yard. If your property is devoid of [leaves](#), but they have a pile of leaves to rake every fall, consider offering your raking services in exchange for taking that free mulch home.

Tips for mulching

Get your free mulch and take it home. Now it's time to apply it around your plants. The key to applying mulch is not to lay it down too thick. Too thick a layer can prevent plant roots from breathing and eventually suffocate them. Yikes!

Aim for about 1 to 2 inches of mulch around the base of a plant. After mulching, water deeply. You may have to reapply mulch throughout the season, but one application is usually enough to last a whole gardening season.

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.

Keep the Garden Well-Watered: 5 Tried & True Tools



Years ago, when, with the help of my dad, I started my first vegetable garden, I was vaguely aware of the importance of watering plants. I watered whenever I felt like it, and whenever it seemed like my plants yearned for moisture—it turns out many of the symptoms of [overwatering](#) and under watering are shockingly similar. I struggled to keep the garden well-watered.

Watering Epiphany

One of the main reasons for my irregular watering schedule was that my garden was tucked away in the depths of the yard, and getting there meant trekking out with shoes and lugging the heavy hose to where it was needed. It was an ordeal. When I moved out of my parent's home and created a garden plot of my own, I watered here and there but didn't start really soaking

my plants until a year into things. I quickly realized that my haphazard watering wasn't going to cut it in this new patch of dirt. The spot, blessed with sun, dried out a whole lot quicker than in my very shaded garden of yesteryear.

Tried and True Watering Tools

I've spent a couple of years fiddling with water implements and figuring out the best solution for my little garden. Here's what I've found works for me.

Keep your garden well-watered with these must-have supplies.

Expandable hose

They're typically cheaper than a traditional chunky, cumbersome hose and are easy to carry around the garden. At the end of the season, it's super easy to pack up the flexible hose and toss it into the bin of supplies that will head to the basement for the winter. The drawback is that flexible hoses are less durable, but if you're careful and take good care of your watering implement, it should last a few seasons. There are also plenty of high-quality flexi-hoses with triple-layer protection, though they typically cost more. Buy one with a sprayer attachment that features multiple settings. Use the misting setting on tender [seedlings](#) and the soaker setting to water plants deeply from below.

Watering can

I use a super durable plastic watering can. It's been around for years and hasn't failed me yet. It's helpful for watering areas where the hose doesn't reach and for watering when the water is shut for the winter.

Mulch

[Mulch](#) won't provide your crops with water, but it conserves moisture exceptionally well. Without mulch, my topsoil dries

up super quickly—even if I water at regular intervals. There are plenty of cheap and free mulch options, including grass clipping, leaf mold, and shredded cardboard or newspaper. My preference is straw, but it's not always readily available.

Soaker hose

I tried a fancy irrigation set up in my raised beds years ago, and it was an utter failure. The hoses got in the way of my footpaths, and it was more trouble than it was worth. That doesn't mean I completely gave up on irrigation. I recently installed soaker hoses in some of my ground-level beds, where I plan to plant [perennials](#) and other easy-to-maintain plants. Currently, only the hardiest of plants survive there because of the lack of water. The roof overhang blocks the rain and getting the hose there is a pain in the butt, so I use soaker hoses to water the area.

The weather forecast

Overwatering can be as problematic as under-watering, so while you must give thirsty plants sustenance, it's also wise to check the weather forecast before dumping a whole gallon of water into your beds. Don't waste this precious resource if it's looking like a rainstorm is on the way. Unless your plants are begging for water, it can wait.

*Do you have any favorite watering tools? How do you keep your garden well-watered? Are you fond of any watering tricks that have netted you lush, bushy plants year after year? I'd love to hear your water-wise tips! **Share them with me in the comments.***