

In the dirt: **Mulch**

Size: Possible for any size of garden bed.

Maximum capacity: Close to plants, mulch should not be piled more than 4 inches deep. Between plants, mulch can be piled as deep as desired.

Price: free

Tester satisfaction: high

What you can put in it: Dry brown materials such as leaves, straw, dry grass clippings or woodchips.

“Yuck” factor: None. Dry brown materials break down slowly with no smell.

Complexity to use: Low. Material is piled and left. It may be necessary to pull excess mulch off of plants in spring.

In winter: Mulch protects sensitive plants from winter-kill.

Mobility: The system cannot be moved.

Tested by: **Nancy**

Nancy lives in a household of three with a small yard and garden. She has kept a ramshackle compost bin for decades, but only started mulching four years before the study as a way to use up her excess tree leaves. She also appreciates the mulch for protecting her strawberries in the wintertime and suppressing weeds. Nancy and her husband travel back and forth between their city home and a grain farm throughout the growing season—it is important to her to not have the weeds get out of control while she is gone.

Results:

Testing period: May 2014—November 2014

Inputs:

- 920 litres of organic waste (100% browns)
- Watering and aerating unnecessary

Outputs:

- Mulch does not produce finished compost.

Recommendations:

Mulching is an excellent, cost-free way for community gardens or households with garden space to use up large amounts of dry brown material. The materials can be added whenever is convenient. For example, tree leaves can be added in fall and left to break down all year.

The mulch protects perennials from winter-kill and helps to suppress weed growth in spring and summer. (It is best not to use leaves mixed with tree seeds if possible, as these will sprout.) Mulch also helps keep soil damp and protect plant roots from rapid temperature changes.

As the mulch slowly decomposes, it adds valuable organic matter to the soil beneath. Nancy says her garden soil is noticeable looser and more fertile since she began mulching. Leaf mulch is also a haven for ladybugs, which help control aphid infestations.

