

1 Healthy soils and water



...caring about gardens

Nature has been mulching for millions of years in many different ways. Earthworms, insects, fungi and bacteria break down organic matter from plants and animals into valuable mulch. When we throw away leaves that fall in the garden, we are removing this valuable soil covering.

So what are the benefits of mulch?

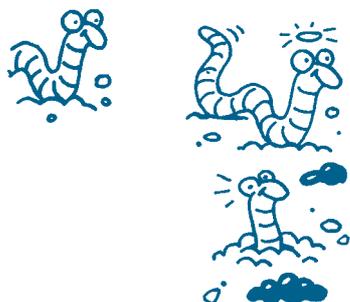
- ✓ It insulates the soil and plant roots from temperature extremes.
- ✓ Reduces evaporation and therefore the amount of water required.
- ✓ It increases the water holding capacity of the soil.
- ✓ It protects the earthworms and micro bacteria in the soil.
- ✓ It protects the soil from erosion.
- ✓ It reduces weeds, which compete for water and nutrients.
- ✓ It adds valuable nutrients to the soil.
- ✓ It looks good!



In nature, mulch not only helps soils to retain water, it also acts as insulation. This works in the same way as insulation in our homes. By using a layer of mulch we are providing a 'thermal blanket' that keeps the soil at a constant temperature. This protects the soil structure and reduces evaporation – which helps soil hold water longer – a great benefit for plants!

Earthworms thrive under mulch because the soil is cooler. The worms will break down the mulch and other organic matter, adding valuable worm casting to the soil. Because of the improvements in organic matter and structure soils, with worms will have a better water retention rate.

Mulching will also reduce the amount of weeds, so you will save water and do less weeding!



Here are the basics to keep in mind when mulching;

- ✓ Mulch needs to be at least 7centimetres thick to work effectively.
- ✓ Make sure the soil is moist before adding the mulch.
- ✓ Remove the mulch from around the plant stem/trunk so as to prevent collar rot.
- ✓ Don't add manure as mulch in dry times. The plants will have a growth spurt and may run out of water, and manures can burn the roots if not watered in correctly.
- ✓ Mulch needs to be topped up at least every 12 months.

Mulching improves the look of the garden by adding different textures and colours. There are many types of mulch – straw, bark chips, pebbles and even plants which are 'living mulches'. Chose one to suit your style and plants and before you know it, you'll be on your way to a 'Wise about Water' garden.

