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MULCH CORNER:

AGED NATIVE MULCH

by John Ferguson

A question we occasionally hear from customers is; "Why does your mulch have so many fines in it?"

(These smaller particles -- the fines -- are denser and will settle and the lighter woodier pieces will naturally float to the top recreating the compost-mulch layer we find in the forest that plants prefer, **in only one step**).

The short answer is that it makes the mulch a much higher quality which works better and faster, resulting in healthier and more beautiful plants. To be a successful gardener in Texas one must mulch (and everywhere else also). Mulch comes from the German "molsch," meaning "soft," and refers to any loose, generally soft material that is laid down on top of the soil to protect a plant's roots or spread lightly over the plant itself.

Mulch is not a soil amendment; it is a covering or surface layer used to protect the topsoil. Nature does not allow bare ground hence neither should we.

Mulching is considered by many to be the most important step in any gardening program. Hence the results one gets is directly tied to the quality of the mulch one uses.

All natural or organic mulches will improve the soil but like all things, they vary in quality and effectiveness. Good mulch lets air (oxygen) and water enter the soil and allows carbon dioxide to escape. Good mulch will readily decompose releasing the stored nutrients which will provide microorganisms, earthworms and beneficial insects a good home, food and an energy source.



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If one listens to Randy Lemmon or Danny Milliken, the hosts of our radio gardening shows, or read about mulching in many gardening books, it is recommended to place down a two-inch layer of compost before applying the mulch.

The Bible tells us to study nature, hence this process copies nature where we have a soil layer, then a layer of deep dark brown crumbly stuff (i.e. compost) with a lighter brown three-inch layer of leaves and twigs on top (mulch).

The old approach is to have a person order and apply two different products. This is often time consuming and confusing for many folks. Hence, it is often not done.

At Nature's Way Resources, we make our Aged Native Mulch (composted) in a way that includes the compost!

We make our "native" mulch primarily from the small branches and limbs of trees which is the nutrient rich portion. This is why deer and other animals eat them for food.

The cambium layers of bark and leaves quickly decompose into a fungal rich compost full of nutrients and beneficial microbes that plants love and require. These small compost particles are the fines one sees in the mulch. These smaller particles (fines) provide the energy and food for the microbes and earthworms to allow them to create a healthy soil for your plants.

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General benefits: Economical, the composting process concentrates nutrients and stabilizes nitrogen, the heat from the composting kills weed seeds and pathogens, improves plant and soil health, and it sets up quickly to resist blowing or washing out as it feeds the microbes required. The composting process naturally turns the mulch into a humus rich, deep beautiful chocolate brown.

Numerous studies have shown this type of mulch prevents many plant diseases, encourages high levels of microbial biodiversity in the soil, and increases tree and plant growth rates.

This type of mulch encourages strong and vigorous root growth that leads to plants that can withstand a drought or strong winds much better. Fruits tend to be larger and more flavorful; flowers have more intense colors and the fragrance is stronger.

Over 30 years of research has shown that this type of mulch improves soil quality better and quicker (whether clay or sand) than any other amendments. Over time it will turn even gumbo clay into a beautiful rich loam that plants love.

Our goal is to help our customers have beautiful gardens and flower beds. It takes a lot more time and effort to grind, process, and compost the mulch properly, but we believe you, the customers, are worth it.