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The Lake County Mission Statement

The Mission of the UF/IFAS Mater Gardener Volunteers is to assist extension agents by providing horticultural education programs and current research-based information to the public through plant clinics, community outreach and through Discovery Gardens.

Garden Scoop

Mulch

BY K.S. Kennen, MGV

Using mulch, the ninth principle of Florida Friendly Principles, is something gardeners may overlook or implement incorrectly. It is essential to use mulch to not only retain moisture, but to hinder weed growth, discourage insect pests, and hamper the spread of plant pathogens.

Selecting Mulch

There are six things to consider when selecting mulch. First is the cost. What is your budget? The area to be mulched may be very large and have to be done with a limited budget; so, you might have to consider a “free” mulch. The second consideration in selection of mulch is color. The common colors are brown (many shades), red, and black. Black is often chosen because it gives a high contrast with plants and can really accent the landscape. Red and brown both add a natural look to the landscape. One concern though when using colored mulch is how it gets its color. Fortunately, most colored mulch is dyed using organic colorants such as iron oxide or carbon and is not harmful to the landscape plants. The third consideration to examine is the origin of the mulch. For example, UF/IFAS does not recommend purchasing cypress mulch because there is no way to be certain that the mulch does not come from Florida’s ecologically sensitive forested wetlands. Also, think twice about using free mulch or utility mulch which is material that cities and counties have mulched from trim-ming, maintaining, or clearing properties because it may contain weed seeds, leaves, and dirt.

Durability is the fourth thing to consider when selecting a mulch. Pine straw is a very natural mulch to use and relatively inexpensive and a bale should cover roughly 50 square feet. It does need to be renewed every six to twelve months. Pine bark mulch is relatively durable and can last up to seven years depending on the size of the bark nuggets and the climate. It also does well to maintain its color. In addition to durability of mulch, consider the nutrient value.

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The Foundation for The Gator Nation

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Mulch cont'd.

All mulches will eventually break down and the physical structure of the soil will change. Which leads to the fifth consideration when selecting a mulch. How does the type of mulch change your soil? What nutrient value can mulch add? Pine straw is great for camelias and azaleas since they both like a slightly acidic soil and that is what pine straw adds as it decomposes. Also, any mulch when it is acting as a great insulator, keeps the moisture in and blocks the hot sun from pulling the essential nutrients up and out of the ground. Finally, consider what type of texture you would like to have when you mulch your landscape. Pine straw over time, looks like a flat, solid layer with little texture. Whereas, large nugget pine bark has a very textured look that stays textured and does not blend easily into the ground. Most of the other mulches have elongated, particles that will compress over time easily and create a flattened look. For example, mixed hardwood mulch consists of scraps too small to use and creates a light-colored, low texture mulch. The pieces easily form a solid mat.

Applying Mulch

Weed the area that you will be applying mulch to and apply a two-to-three inch layer of mulch. Note that large nuggets of mulch will settle about one inch. Do not apply more than three inches since going above that amount could impede the absorption of water from rain or irrigation. When applying around trees, keep it 12 to 18 inches away from the trunk of the tree. If you are concerned about aesthetics, you can apply one inch of mulch up to the trunk in the open area. When considering how far out the mulch should be applied, determine the circumference of the tree trunk (trunk caliper) and provide a 2-to-3-foot diameter circle of mulch per inch of tree trunk caliper. This is important because root growth extends far out from the tree trunk and mulch will allow for more moisture to be provided to the root system and allow for better root growth and supply the tree with more support. If you are sowing seeds for woody and herbaceous plants apply a one-inch layer of mulch to help retain moisture but not hamper emergence and survival of the seedlings. Once the new plants are established, the amount of mulch can be increased to two or three inches.

Did You Know?

- Fallen leaves and grass can be used as mulch when raked into beds or around trees. Keep in mind though that they will break down rapidly and need to be replaced often. Having leaves as mulch under trees creates a natural, self-mulch area.
- Eucalyptus is a renewable mulch and comes from trees grown specifically for mulch on plantations in south and central Florida. It is a fast-growing wood, so it is considered a renewable resource.
- Occasionally rake your mulch if it is becoming a solid mat so water will be able to penetrate the mulch.

Resource

<https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/publication/EP626>

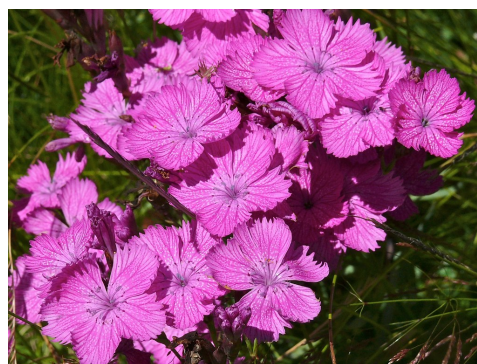
Dianthus—Cool Weather Blooms

BY K. S. Kennen, MGV

If you are looking to add some color to your garden during the cooler month of January, try planting some dianthus. This star-shaped, pinked-edged bloom was given its name from the Greek philosopher Theophrastus and it means “divine flower” (dios + anthos). This cool season plant can give blooms to your garden until the weather warms up in May. It is a hardy and adaptable plant. Plant in a sunny location, preferably the morning sun, and be sure to deadhead it to keep it blooming. One thing to be aware of is that dianthus can be prone to stem rot so it will not tolerate wet soil. Some gardeners will plant it on a small mound to elevate it and do not mulch around the plant. You can also sow seeds in January and can expect germination in about ten days. Just be sure to thin to about six to twelve inches apart so there will be air circulation around the plants.

There are over three hundred species of dianthus but this article will focus on only three: Sweet William (*D. barbatus*), pinks (*D. chinensis*), and Telstar which is a hybrid that was developed combining Sweet William and pinks. Sweet William is native to Southeastern Europe and parts of Asia. It is said to symbolize gallantry. It can grow 12 to 24 inches tall and 6 to 12 inches wide. The colors can be red, white, pink or scarlet, patterned or monochrome. This is a perennial and usually blooms its second year. Unfortunately, it does suffer from Fusarium wilt. Pinks are original-ly from China or Korea. This bushy, low-growing annual comes in single, double, or frilled lavender, red, purple, white, salmon, and pink blooms. Like other dianthus, pinks like well-drained soil and should be dry before watering again. Finally, there is the hybrid Telstar which was developed to combat Phytophthora (root rot) that dianthus does succumb to in humid and wet atmosphere. This would be perfect to have in Florida with our humid weather, but since this is a cool weather plant, the humidity is not as much a problem in our cooler months.

When planting, put in morning sun area in soil that is below 7 pH and that has been amended with compost since dianthus are light feeders. Be sure to keep watch for slugs and aphids that can make the plants look sickly but should not kill them if you remove or treat with natural neem oil or insecticidal soap. For more information refer to <https://gardeningolutions.ifas.ufl.edu/plants/ornamentals/dianthus.htm>



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MSU Extension/Gary Bachman

Plant Clinic Clatter



DEAR MASTER GARDENER: When do I need to be concerned about winter temperatures?

DEAR HOMEOWNER: Here in Central Florida we don't usually need to cover or protect plants from freezes – especially native plants. However, keep in mind the following:

First freeze can occur as early as December 14th, but our historical average is Jan. 1st

Last freeze can occur as late as February 28th, but our historical average date is Feb. 3rd

The classification of freeze temperatures is based on their effect on plants:

Light freeze: 29° to 32°F (-1.7° to 0°C)—tender plants are killed. You can cover plants at 30°

Moderate freeze: 25° to 28°F (-3.9° to -2.2°C)—widely destructive to most vegetation

To help protect your plants from freeze, refer to the article *Cold Protection of Landscape Plants* found at <https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/publication/MG025>.

Garden Of the Month

November— Vegetable Garden

Congratulations to Kelly Varon, lead for the vegetable garden. This is a challenging garden to maintain in Florida since vegetables can be planted year round . In January some cool crops to plant could be turnips (harvest in 40 days); beets (harvest in 50 to 70 days); cabbage (harvest in 60 to 90 days); potatoes (harvest in 90 to 120 days).



Discovery Gardens

Please plan a visit to over twenty different gardens located at 1951 Woodlea Road in Tavares. The hours are Monday through Friday and the third Saturday of the month from 8 am until 4 pm Just like your yard, Discovery Garden changes with the seasons and will reveal something new with each visit. Come see the changes in the garden.

Tremendous: Mulch Your Landscape

Jamie Daugherty, RHA

Mulch is separated into two categories: organic and inorganic. Organic mulch comes from something that was once alive. Often composed of leaves, bark, and other plant parts, it provides nutrients in the soil as it breaks down. Organic mulch also increases the water holding capacity of the soil. It does require regular replacement as it decomposes. Inorganic mulch was never alive. This would include things like rubber and gravel. Inorganic mulch does not need to be replaced frequently, but it does not provide added nutrients and water holding capacity.

Pine Bark: This mulch provides soil cooling in the summer by controlling moisture and insulation for plants in the winter. Pine bark mulch can give a landscape a finished look with a natural color. It breaks down slowly while providing nutrients to plants. It can be great in pots as well as landscapes.

Pine Straw: The pine needles from paper producing pine plantations can be used as mulch. It is frequently used in areas looking for a more natural aesthetic. You can also collect this from your lawn if you have pine trees. Pine mulch will settle and needs to be replaced yearly. This is often the cheapest mulch option.

Fallen Leaves: If you have ever raked leaves, then dreaded bagging them up, consider using them as mulch instead! They can be mixed with grass clippings to provide a high nutrient mulch for landscape beds. If you have larger leaves, mow them before using as mulch to speed up the breakdown process and increasing nutrients available to plants. While this mulch provides nutrients and insulation, you will need to replace it frequently as it breaks down. If you have a lot of trees, this should not be an issue. One downside is that it looks less manicured than other options discussed here.

Melaleuca: Melaleuca trees are an introduced invasive species in Florida. This mulch is produced by chipping trees. Seeds are destroyed through a curing process, so no need to worry about them sprouting in your landscape! This mulch has a similar look to cypress mulch but is more environmentally beneficial.

Utility Mulch: This product is a mix of plants that have been mulched during routine utility pruning. Often containing weed seeds and potential disease-causing agents, you will want to consider its use carefully. The benefit is that it is often free, and you can get a large amount at one time.

Gravel/Rocks: Gravel and rocks do not prevent weeds. You will have to use a water permeable weed barrier before installation and there is no benefit of added nutrients or moisture retention. While they will last a long time, cleaning is required. Use this in areas with potted plants, or in more arid landscapes.

Rubber Mulch: Made from recycled tires, this can work better in play areas than in landscape beds. This mulch may leach toxins in the soil, create high soil temperature, and does not do well at suppressing weeds. While it will not need replacement often, there is no real benefit to plants.

Dyed Mulch: Dyed mulch is not of great quality. It is not because it is dyed, it is because the wood comes from a range of recycled wood. This can include pallets, wood scraps, demolition waste, and more. The recycled wood can be contaminated with various chemicals. The wood is also very dry. This results in a slower break down of the materials. Dyed mulch can take nitrogen away from plants during decomposition, rather than provide nitrogen.

Cypress Mulch: Cypress mulch should be avoided. It is difficult to determine the origin of this mulch. Some harvesting practices can be damaging to endangered ecosystems.

LIBRARY CLASSES

January presentations at selected libraries will focus on learning about planting, establishing, and pruning trees. Also, about the importance of selection according to landscape requirements as related to sites and tree types.

January 8, 2024, 2 – 3 pm

Tree Planting, Establishment, and Pruning Free and no registration

Umatilla Public Library

January 16, 2024, 12—1 pm

Tree Planting, Establishment, and Pruning Free and no registration

Eustis Memorial Public Library

January 16, 2024, 4—5 pm

Tree Planting, Establishment, and Pruning Free and no registration

Leesburg Public Library

January 17, 2024, 2—3 pm

Tree Planting, Establishment, and Pruning Free and no registration

Tavares Public Library

January 17, 2024, 6—7 pm

Tree Planting, Establishment, and Pruning Free

Marion Baysinger Memorial Library

Mt. Dora Public Library Presentation

January 14, 2024, 2 –3 pm

Houseplants— Learn about popular houseplants and how to care for them in your home.

Free and no registration

An Equal Opportunity Institution. UF/IFAS Extension, University of Florida, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, Andra Johnson, Dean. Single copies of UF/IFAS Extension publications (excluding 4-H and youth publications) are available free to Florida residents from county UF/IFAS Extension offices.

Master Gardener Volunteer Plant Clinic

Bring your plant, insect, and soil problems to our Plant Clinic for advice Monday and Wednesday 10:00 am to 2:00 pm. The plant clinic is staffed by volunteers. Please call ahead at 352-343-4101 to be sure that someone is in the clinic to assist you with your question.

You may also send photos of your local problems to Jamielyn Daugherty at jdaugherty@ufl.edu or to the plant clinic at lakemg@ifas.ufl.edu.