

Brighton & Hove City Council
Arboricultural Information Note No. 6

Mulching your borders with wood chips



The benefits of applying mulch to our shrub beds and borders are well-known to most gardeners and landscape managers. Long dry summers are becoming more frequent and expensive shrubs and plants are being lost as hosepipe bans increase. An application of mulch will not only enhance the appearance of the beds, but will retain all important soil moisture.

Brighton & Hove City Council has a programme of recycling all waste prunings by processing them through woodchippers. These are the large noisy machines ‘eating’ the branches that you see the tree surgeons use. These chips are taken back to our yard, composted for a year and then used on shrub borders throughout the City.

“So, what are the benefits of using woodchip mulch on my garden?” you may ask. The list is a long one but the highlights are as follows:-

- ◆ Most annual weeds are suppressed and any that do germinate are easily pulled out.
- ◆ Soil moisture levels that have accumulated during autumn and winter are maintained through spring and summer, helping to ensure the survival of precious plantings and cutting down on water usage.
- ◆ Mulch will significantly increase the earthworm population and keep them active for longer periods during the year. This will improve soil structure and drainage - important in heavy clay soils.
- ◆ It has been shown that mulch will increase the predatory spider population by a factor of 10. This means you will not have to use so many chemicals in your garden to control pests.
- ◆ Mulch provides a good home for ground beetles which will then predate on young slugs and their eggs.
- ◆ This increase in the invertebrate population will encourage birds into your garden to feed and breed.
- ◆ A thick layer of mulch will retain summer heat in the soil, reducing the chance of early frost damage and extending the growing season.

Wood chip mulch is unsuitable for digging into the soil as an improver until it has been composted or has had additional nitrogen added to it. Composting should take from six months to a year with the

pile being turned regularly. The application of mulch to the borders should be at least 100mm deep but may need topping up from time to time as earthworms draw down the compost into the soil.

Woodchip mulch may be purchased direct from your local garden centre or possibly from local arboricultural contractors. Woodchip from the garden centre is likely to have been composted for the required period and can be used immediately. While this may also be the case when buying from your local arboricultural contractor, it would be wise to check on the age of the material available before purchase.

You may find that toadstools appear on the chips during autumn giving concern that this may be harmful to the plants in the border. Fortunately the fungi are not harmful and only feed from the chips themselves. They are not harmful to children but they should be made aware that nibbling of toadstools and mushrooms is dangerous and should be discouraged.

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