

Mulch, mulch, mulch to conserve water

By Mark Collins

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BOULDER, Colo. Following a relatively dry winter, conserving water along the Front Range will be key.

One way to drastically reduce the amount of water used on your exterior landscape is by applying mulch. According to a study cited by the Colorado State University Extension program, using mulch can cut water use on your landscape by 25 to 50 percent.

"There are a lot of benefits of using mulch for water conservation," said Jeannine Shaw, water division director of the Center for ReSource Conservation in Boulder. "One would be that it helps reduce the amount of evaporation from the soil. It also helps the plant stay healthier because it holds the moisture, which means you don't have to water it as often."

There are two kinds of mulch, organic and inorganic. Organic mulch consists of anything that will eventually break down and become part of the soil, such as wood chips or general yard waste.

Inorganic mulch includes stone, gravel or weed-barrier fabrics. Shaw points out that inorganic mulches can retain heat, which some plants like and others don't.

Organic mulch works well with most plants, but can blow away in windy weather.

"It really is going to come down to what your purpose for using the mulch is," Shaw said, when asked which mulch is best. "The ideal mulch won't compact readily, and it won't hinder water and air movement."

Experts recommend applying 3 to 6 inches of mulch, depending on the type of material used.

Dan Matsch, manager of Eco-Cycle's compost department, urges people to use their own organic stream as a resource for feeding or protecting their landscape.

"Food waste, compost in your backyard, anything that falls on the ground in your yard or that

is generated from your garden should be composted or mulched," Matsch said.

Matsch said using mulch for annuals, like trees, shrubs and grass lawns, is "a no-brainer."

"That's going to be the easiest way to maintain that plant over the long run," Matsch said. "It's going to take much less water. You're going to be creating nutrients without additional fertilizers."

Think twice, though, about using mulch on some perennials, since it can house insects that like to feed on them. Matsch uses mulch around potatoes and tomatoes, but not other vegetables he grows.

Western Disposal offers free mulch made from yard clippings to Boulder County residents at its facility at 5880 Butte Mill Road in Boulder. The company also sells a higher grade of mulch, as well as compost. Find out more at www.westerndisposal.com.

For more information on mulch, visit www.ext.colostate.edu/pubs/garden/07214.html.

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