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Crawford County
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Mulches - Most people know that mulches are beneficial to plant growth, but not everyone knows why, and what different materials are available. When the proper material is applied at the correct time mulch serves many different functions. Here are a few reasons that most people use mulch. One is for aesthetics. Mulch usually makes an area look much nicer. Another common use for mulch is as a physical weed control, and probably the most important functions of mulch is soil moisture retention.

In winter months mulch does many things that help protect and promote plant growth. Mulch helps to protect the soil from the drying effects of the sun and wind. Although most plants are dormant in the winter it is still important to keep the roots moist. A good winter mulch can also moderate the freezing and thawing of soil that can harm shallow roots of many perennials. Newly transplanted trees and shrubs also benefit from a winter mulch. The mulch helps prevent root desiccation and frost heaving. The addition of mulch will help protect plants throughout the winter as well as the hot summers while adding important organic material to the soil.

A common problem encountered when using mulch is placement and amount. If mulch layers become too thick around the young plants it can create an environment that promotes plant diseases. If thick layers of mulch are desired it is a good idea to leave an area around trunks that is free of material. It is also beneficial to remove some of the mulch each year or if it is in an annual garden the material can be turned under. When thin layers are used, yearly addition of mulch should not cause a buildup problem. Mulch that is placed too close to a house can also serve as good habitat for insects such as centipedes.

There is much debate about what type of mulch to use, and many things to consider when selecting mulch. Probably the two most important factors are cost and availability. Commonly used mulches are leaves, grass clippings, wood chips or bark, as well as pine straw. There are some specialty type mulches that are available only in certain locations. These are products such as peanut hulls, paper pulp, corn and other crop debris and also tobacco debris (which has some insecticidal properties). In tests conducted by Extension personnel, pine straw was found to be the best mulch when compared with bare ground and chipped lawn refuse (limbs, leaves, and grass).