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Don't forget to mulch: It can do so much for your garden



Courtesy of Linda Cobb

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Great garden soil is made by topping your garden with mulch. This vegetable garden uses Gardener's Choice on top of the soil.

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Garden Cameos

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I have long believed in the benefits of mulch, and early spring is the time to educate yourself on this subject. What is it, why do I need it, and can I get by without it? You are probably asking yourself these questions right now.

There are many types of mulch, and you need it to keep the roots of your plants cool, the weeds out of your garden beds, and to keep the moisture in your garden beds. And no, if you care about all of the hard work you are going to do this spring, you cannot do without it. It is the most important spring chore you can do.

After all, my garden isn't ready for the spring dance unless she has her dress on, or in this case, the mulch down.

So let's talk mulch. I went to visit Southern Mulch at 3981 Highway 9 in Boiling Springs. I started at its recycling facility and learned that mulch starts out as dead leaves collected from all over. The facility is keeping the leaves out of the county landfill, recycling them for a better use. DHEC regulates these types of facilities every four years to be sure they are kept up to their standards.

Leaf piles "cook" in the sun over a period of time, with employees turning them every so often. As they turn them, oxygen is introduced and decomposition begins. A 6-foot probe is stuck into the pile to measure its temperature. They wait, wait and wait some more, turning the piles over and over. It can take up to two years to turn a pile of leaves into mulch, or "black gold" as I call it.

When a pile is finished "cooking," it is filtered through a screen. By the time it reaches this stage, employees are looking for the squeeze test, which means that the mulch should stay together in a ball when squeezed in your hand. There should be no water dripping out of it.

The product that Southern Mulch sells the most of is something called "Gardener's Choice." Poultry litter is introduced into the mulch, giving it fertilizing properties. I must admit, this is my favorite product. It is great mulch with a little extra. The store works to keep it natural and noninvasive. I top every one of my beds with this every spring. Over the course of the year, it breaks down and goes into my soil, enriching it as time goes by.

If you practice this one good gardening habit each spring, you will be light years ahead when it comes to the soil in your garden. When you start out, the soil is hard red clay, and by adding this or any soil conditioner to the garden every year, you are improving the soil as you go. When you buy mulch from anyone, be sure to ask what size "scoop" they are using. This is a case where size matters in a big way. Educate yourself on what one cubic yard actually looks like.

Southern Mulch sells Organic Topsoil (75 percent topsoil, 25 percent Gardener's Choice), which is used in making garden beds. Double Ground Mulch has a drought benefit when you use it over your garden beds to protect and hold in the moisture. Triple Ground Mulch is used to amend the soil and especially as an additive to clay soils.

In their retail store on Highway 9, Lee Bristol helps customers.

“If you want a custom mix, say part Gardener’s Choice, part top soil or pine bark, we can blend that for you. There is a 5-cubic-yard minimum. Our delivery times are usually right away.” Bristol says. “I like doing this because I am doing something environmentally friendly and helping my customers get great results in their gardens at home, all at the same time.”

Southern Mulch is open Monday through Saturday, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. You can visit the business online, where it offers coupon specials at www.southernmulch.com. Its phone number is 582-2275. It has offices in Spartanburg and Greenville.

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