

The Good, Bad, and the Ugly

by Lyn Chimera

Mulching your garden and vegetable beds is recommended to protect the soil, control weeds, hold in moisture, as well as give the garden a finished look. One of the greatest benefits of mulches is that they can break down and add nutrients and organic matter to the soil.

There are many options for mulching. Some are more effective than others. One of the new trends is colored (dyed) mulch. People like the look of it but don't consider the ecological implications.

One of the biggest concerns with dyed mulch is not the dyes themselves. Most colored mulches are dyed with harmless dyes, like iron oxide-based or carbon-based dyes. Some cheaply dyed mulches, however, can be dyed with harmful or toxic chemicals. The ingredient information on the bags should tell you what's in it.

The biggest problem with dyed mulch is surprisingly not the dye but the wood that's used. Most natural mulches, like double or triple-shredded mulch, cedar mulch, or pine bark, are made directly from trees. However, most colored mulches are made from recycled wood like old pallets, decks, crates, etc. These scraps of treated or manufactured lumber products often have been treated with various chemicals and heavy metals to prevent deterioration. The chemicals can include chromium, copper, aluminum, arsenic, creosote, lead and formaldehyde. These chemicals can leach out and exist in the soil for a very long time. Because of this, dyed mulches break down much slower than natural mulches. When wood breaks down, it requires nitrogen to do so. Colored mulch in gardens can rob the plants of the nitrogen they need to survive.

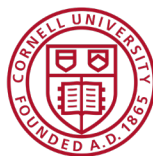
Healthy soils need inputs of organic matter to help maintain their structure and water retaining abilities. Good mulch like compost, straw or shredded leaves is ideal for mulching as well as soil improvement. Even ground tree mulch is better than dyed mulch because it doesn't contain contaminants, although it doesn't break down easily or do much to improve the soil.

All that being said, it is possible to buy dyed mulch that is made of tree wood and dyed with natural dyes. You need to do research to find such products which will be much more expensive. My attitude is, why bother when natural mulches are much better, more effective, add nutrients to the soil, and are not harmful to the soil.

For many years I have used mulched leaves as mulch. It's free and nature's way of protecting and improving the soil. Think of the woods and meadows. Only Mother Nature mulches there and the soil is protected and improved at the same time. If you haven't purchased mulch yet, stay away from the dyed products.



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