

Mulch Policy

Introduction

Mulch is a top dressing which serves three main purposes in horticulture:

- helps retain moisture,
- reduce weeds
- provide nourishment or condition the soil.

Some mulches can do all three although most are generally used for the first two purposes. Lowestoft Town Council has started using mulch prior to declaring a climate crisis and mulching is already mentioned throughout the Open Spaces Strategy however this policy strengthens the council's commitment and will become an appendix to the Open Spaces Strategy.

Use of Mulch

The council is committed to improving horticulture within its parks, play areas and open spaces. Where the council creates new planting areas with bare soil surfaces, it will mulch the exposed surface in order to prevent weeds taking hold and to reduce evaporation of water. This has the benefits of allowing new planting to establish more quickly whilst improving the natural environment.

There are two key seasons when mulching is beneficial which are autumn and spring and different mulches can be used at this time. Autumn mulching has traditionally been more about soil improvement and protecting more tender plants, whereas Spring mulching is generally more about retaining water and controlling weeds. However, where a new planting area has been created in the Autumn, and soil improvement has already taken place, a Spring style mulch will be added in order to protect and aid the development of the new plants. The best form of mulching is a rotational mulching process which would work on a five-yearly cycle and for the main consist of Spring mulching.

- Year 1 - Use an organic mulch to a minimum depth of two inches on the surface of the soil
- Year 2 - Use an organic feed such as liquid seaweed, liquid comfrey or nettle feeds.
- Year 3 - Top up the mulch to ensure coverage
- Year 4 - Use an organic feed such as liquid seaweed, liquid comfrey or nettle feeds.
- Year 5 - Remove the existing mulch and use to top up other mulched areas, then add a soil conditioning mulch to a depth of two inches across the surface of the bed
- Year 6 - Fork in the conditioning mulch and replace with a two-inch organic mulch as in year 1.

This rotation will provide the best outcome as it will improve the soil and provide nutrients to the plants whilst also retaining water and reducing weeds. Additional adding organic matter to the soil also aids with storing of carbon which benefits the environment and opens up the soil enabling it to be more resilient in floods and droughts.

Types of Mulch

There are three key kinds of mulch:

- Biodegradable
- Permanent
- Conditioning

Each of these has their own uses and the council will consider the appropriate use in each location. Conditioning mulch will generally be used as part of the rotation mulching discussed about in addition to either biodegradable or permanent mulching.

Permanent Mulches

These are mulches which do not decay readily and consist of materials such as gravel/shingle, slate, recycled materials (such as rubber from old car tyres), even glass and metals.

Biodegradable Mulches

These are mulches which will only last for a few years as they will rot down and help improve the soil over a period of time and consist of things like wood bark, wood chippings, spent mushroom compost, leaves, straw and shredded paper. However the later items are generally better added

to a compost heap than as a mulch as they are less controllable as a mulch. Straw can be very useful as an autumn mulch where it is used to protect tender or young plants.

Conditioning Mulches

This is a mulch that will generally only be used for a year and then forked into the soil and consists of such materials as ground manure and compost although it could also include pine needles/bark/chippings which are often used to make a soil more acidic.

The majority of the council's bare soil planting will have a combination of biodegradable and conditioning mulches on a rotational basis, however permanent mulches may also be used on a rotational basis with conditioning mulches in specific areas, these might include:

- Planters and pots
- Sensory gardens
- Dry gardens

Conclusion

The council will engage in a three-year initial project to mulch existing bare earth planting in our parks, play areas and open spaces. Working with our contractors we will identify locations and appropriate mulches and start the rotating cycles with the first two-inch mulch in two-thirds of these areas and a two-inch conditioning mulch in the last third of the areas in the first year. In the second year, half of the first two thirds will have the mulch removed and that will be added to the mulch in the other half of the first two thirds of the areas. The cleared areas will then be dressed with conditioning mulch. The areas which were dressed with conditioning mulch in the first year will be dressed with regular mulch. In the third year the rotational cycle will be in full flow and any new planting areas can be added in to the rotation.