

## **Mulch – a plant’s best friend**

By: Billy Skaggs, Hall County Extension Agent

With many Georgia homeowners wondering if their lawns and landscapes will survive the ongoing drought, folks are looking for a ‘miracle fix’ for their water woes. While I know of no water conservation miracle, I recommend going back to basics – primarily, mulch, mulch, mulch.

As bagged mulch can be expensive, I’m often asked about using wood chips and other ‘by-products’ as mulch. Fortunately, we have two great sources of FREE mulch here in Hall County. Hall County Resource Recovery offers free mulch at their location on Chestnut Street (770-535-8284), and City of Gainesville Solid Waste also offers free mulch and leaf compost (770-532-0493).

You may ask, ‘where does this mulch come from?’ Thunderstorms and strong winds are common in our area, and as such, trees fall, limbs snap, and local government cleans up the remains. After a storm, we’re left with mounds of wood chips that can be used on site or are taken to a local storage facility.

After receiving many questions about the use of chips in the landscape, I’ve compiled a collection of pointers from Dr. Kim Coder, Extension Forest Resources Specialist. Hopefully, these comments will help answer any questions.

The use of chips as mulch for shrubs and trees is absolutely their best use. Chips conserve moisture, prevent weeds and grass growing in the root area and keep the plant roots cool. The appropriate thickness of the layer of chips depends on the proportion of “fines” in the mix.

If you hold a double handful of the chip mix in a breeze and let it sift through your fingers, the fines (small pieces of leaves and needles) blow several feet away. The heavy, coarse chips fall to the ground quickly.

If there is a high proportion of fines, the chip layer should be 2 inches thick.  
If the mix is mostly coarse chips, the layer can be up to 4 inches thick.

Homeowners may be worried about the chips poisoning their plants. In scientific terms, this is called “allelopathy”. You are probably aware that black walnut trees prevent many plants from growing underneath their canopy. But walnut chips exhibit very little allelopathy. In fact there is rarely a reason for a homeowner to be concerned with this problem.

Only in unusual circumstances do wood chips inhibit woody plant growth. If a chip pile is rained on a few times before it is spread, all of the tannins from oak trees (which might harm willows and shallow-rooted trees) will be washed out.