

## Let's Talk Gardening

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The Country Gardener

### Compost and Mulch

Sorry, I forgot to remind you last week to be sure that the lawnmower blade is sharp before you go out to mow. Remember that a sharp blade cuts the grass but a dull blade tears it. Torn grass is an open invitation to fungus problems. Why chance it? It's not that big a deal to sharpen a blade—you can do it with a file if you don't have a grinder of some type. Oh, and keep the blade set at the proper height for the type of grass you have; St. Augustine, 2.5 inches in the sun and 3.5 inches in the shade; Zoysia, 2 inches; common Bermuda grass, 0.5 to 1 inch; buffalo grass, 3-4 inches or don't mow it at all.

Also, I hope you remembered to change the oil and air filter on the mower. It really needs it after being used out in the yard with all the dust, pollen and other crud that's just lying in the grass. Please do it...at least once a year; more often if you have more dust than usual. And get some fresh gasoline. Get rid of the old stuff left over from last year by taking it to the place that recycles oil and gasoline products. Spend the bucks and buy a few gallons of fresh, new gasoline. Your lawn mower's gonna love ya.

In case you haven't done it yet, it's time to compost all the beds. Add 2-3 inches in every bed and work it in just a little. You don't have to work it in at all if you don't want to—it'll still do the job. After you get the compost down, put mulch on top of it. Think of it as copying what Mother Nature does. Every year, the leaves and twigs fall to the ground and the animals poop on it. This mixture just happens to be the right formula for recycling all the debris that falls each year. If you'd move the top layer (mulch about 2-4 inches deep) aside to see what's underneath, you'd see last year's layer. This layer (compost) is about one inch deep and you can't tell what it used to be any more. Just below this layer is the soil and it's the most active part of the soil because the compost is "feeding" it.

I haven't written about the difference in compost and mulch for a while, and it bears repeating periodically. Let's start by saying that compost can be used for mulch, but mulch normally isn't used for compost. Why? Compost is organic material that is already broken down to almost its final stage. It's usually a dark brown color and smells like freshly-plowed ground. This material is what adds moisture-holding-ability and "tilth" or workability to soil. Mulch, on the other hand, is usually fresher material and/or is bigger chunks of organic material which lays on top of the compost. Natural mulch is usually shredded tree limbs and brush. Organic mulch can also be grass, hay, straw, leaves, bark and inorganic mulch would be material like river-rock, crushed granite, white rocks, and pea gravel. The purposes of mulch are to keep weeds from sprouting, help hold moisture in the soil, and help keep the soil cool. I just got about 5 cubic yards of mulch from a tree trimmer working in the neighborhood. It's free and they deliver. Can't beat a deal like that. It's almost all oak and will last a long time.

Because of our heat and humidity around here, organic mulch decomposes in less than a year and needs to be replaced every year...sometimes twice a year. The same goes for compost. If you do spring and fall veggie gardening, adding compost each time is a must.

Since we haven't had much rain this past 4-5 weeks, you might wanna consider setting the sprinkler system to "on" again. But please don't let it stay on if it rains; and don't have it set to go off every day on the St. Augustine grass. It doesn't need that much water and you'll just be wasting it. Once per week is plenty.

If you are beginning to have bug problems, it's not necessary to spray the whole yard with bug killer. Remember that, like teenagers, only about 2 percent of the bugs out there are bad bugs. The other 98 percent are what keep the 2 percent in check. If you kill all the bugs, your problems are only beginning because there's no way to keep the bad bugs in control. Just be sure that you really do have an infestation before applying any bug killer. Then, use an insecticide that specifically mentions that insect on the label; and PLEASE, follow the directions on the label. More is not better. Spray only the area where you see the bugs or have the problem.

Send your ideas, questions, or comments to: [gardener@gvtc.com](mailto:gardener@gvtc.com)