

BMP C121: Mulching

Purpose

Mulching soils provides immediate temporary protection from erosion. Mulch also enhances plant establishment by conserving moisture, holding fertilizer, seed, and topsoil in place, and moderating soil temperatures. There is an enormous variety of mulches that can be used. This section discusses only the most common types of mulch.

Conditions of Use

As a temporary cover measure, mulch should be used:

- For less than 30 days on disturbed areas that require cover.
- At all times for seeded areas, especially during the wet season and during the hot summer months.
- During the wet season on slopes steeper than 3H:1V with more than 10 feet of vertical relief.
- Mulch may be applied at any time of the year and must be refreshed periodically.
- For seeded areas, mulch may be made up of 100 percent: cottonseed meal; fibers made of wood, recycled cellulose, hemp, kenaf; compost; or blends of these. Tackifier shall be plant-based, such as guar or alpha plantago, or chemical-based such as polyacrylamide or polymers. Any mulch or tackifier product used shall be installed per manufacturer's instructions. Generally, mulches come in 40 to 50 pound bags. Seed and fertilizer are added at time of application.

Design and Installation Specifications

For mulch materials, application rates, and specifications, see Table 3.8. Always use a 2-inch minimum mulch thickness; increase the thickness until the ground is 95 percent covered (i.e., not visible under the mulch layer). Note: Thicknesses may be increased for disturbed areas in or near sensitive areas or other areas highly susceptible to erosion.

Where the option of "compost" is selected, it should be a coarse compost that meets the following size gradations when tested in accordance with the U.S. Composting Council "Test Methods for the Examination of Compost and Composting" (TMECC) Test Method 02.02-B.

Coarse Compost

- Mulch may be applied at any time of the year and must be refreshed periodically

- Minimum Percent passing 3" sieve openings 100 percent
- Minimum Percent passing 1" sieve openings 90 percent
- Minimum Percent passing 0.75" sieve openings 70 percent
- Minimum Percent passing 0.25" sieve openings 40 percent.

Mulch used within the ordinary high-water mark of surface waters should be selected to minimize potential flotation of organic matter. Composted organic materials have higher specific gravities (densities) than straw, wood, or chipped material. Consult Hydraulic Permit Authority (HPA) for mulch mixes if applicable.

Table 3.8. Mulch Standards and Guidelines.

Mulch Material	Quality Standards	Application Rates	Remarks
Straw	Air-dried; free from undesirable seed and coarse material.	2" to 3" thick; five bales per 1,000 sf or 2 to 3 tons per acre	Cost-effective protection when applied with adequate thickness. Hand-application generally requires greater thickness than blown straw. The thickness of straw may be reduced by half when used in conjunction with seeding. In windy areas straw must be held in place by crimping, using a tackifier, or covering with netting. Blown straw always has to be held in place with a tackifier as even light winds will blow it away. Straw, however, has several deficiencies that should be considered when selecting mulch materials. It often introduces and/or encourages the propagation of weed species and it has no significant long-term benefits. It should also not be used within the ordinary high-water elevation of surface waters (due to flotation).
Hydromulch	No growth inhibiting factors.	Approx. 25 to 30 lbs per 1,000 sf or 1,500 to 2,000 lbs per acre	Shall be applied with hydromulcher. Shall not be used without seed and tackifier unless the application rate is at least doubled. Fibers longer than about 0.75 to 1-inch clog hydromulch equipment. Fibers should be kept to less than 0.75 inch.
Compost	No visible water or dust during handling. Must be produced per WAC 173-350, Solid Waste Handling Standards, but may have up to 35% biosolids.	2" thick min.; approx. 100 tons per acre (approx. 800 lbs per yard)	More effective control can be obtained by increasing thickness to 3". Excellent mulch for protecting final grades until landscaping because it can be directly seeded or tilled into soil as an amendment. Compost used for mulch has a coarser size gradation than compost used for BMP C125 or the soil preservation and amendment BMP see Volume III, Section 3.1. It is more stable and practical to use in wet areas and during rainy weather conditions. Do not use near wetlands or near phosphorous impaired water bodies.
Chipped Site Vegetation	Average size shall be several inches. Gradations from fines to 6 inches in length for texture, variation, and interlocking properties.	2" thick min.	This is a cost-effective way to dispose of debris from clearing and grubbing, and it eliminates the problems associated with burning. Generally, it should not be used on slopes above approx. 10 percent because of its tendency to be transported by runoff. It is not recommended within 200 feet of surface waters. If seeding is expected shortly after mulch, the decomposition of the chipped vegetation may tie up nutrients important to grass establishment.

Mulch Material	Quality Standards	Application Rates	Remarks
Wood-based Mulch or Wood Straw	No visible water or dust during handling. Must be purchased from a supplier with a Solid Waste Handling Permit or one exempt from solid waste regulations.	2" thick min.; approx. 100 tons per acre (approx. 800 lbs. per cubic yard)	This material is often called "hog or hogged fuel." The use of mulch ultimately improves the organic matter in the soil. Special caution is advised regarding the source and composition of wood-based mulches. Its preparation typically does not provide any weed seed control, so evidence of residual vegetation in its composition or known inclusion of weed plants or seeds should be monitored and prevented (or minimized).
Wood Strand Mulch	A blend of loose, long, thin wood pieces derived from native conifer or deciduous trees with high length-to-width ratio.	2" thick min.	Cost-effective protection when applied with adequate thickness. A minimum of 95-percent of the wood strand shall have lengths between 2 and 10-inches, with a width and thickness between one-sixteenth and three-eighths inches. The mulch shall not contain resin, tannin, or other compounds in quantities that would be detrimental to plant life. Sawdust or wood shavings shall not be used as mulch. (WSDOT specification (9-14.4(4)))

Maintenance Standards

- The thickness of the cover must be maintained.
- Any areas that experience erosion shall be remulched and/or protected with a net or blanket. If the erosion problem is drainage related, then the problem shall be fixed and the eroded area remulched.