

THE PLANT KINGDOM GREENHOUSE & NURSERY, INC.  
620 FIDELER ROAD  
FAIRBANKS, ALASKA 99712  
907-45-PLANT (907-457-5268)  
OPEN 10AM-7PM EVERYDAY OF THE SUMMER!

# TO MULCH OR NOT TO MULCH

For winters when substantial snow cover occurs before periods of prolonged low temperatures, mulching is probably not crucial to the survival of perennials...several feet of snow cover is very effective insulation. However, in recent years Fairbanks has frequently experienced minus thirty degree F. temperatures with a foot or less of snow cover.

The disadvantages of mulching are that it takes time in the fall, it requires removal and cleaning up in the spring, and straw or leaf mulches may provide habitat for rodents and thus encourage them to eat the perennials being mulched.

The advantage of mulching of course is that it may prevent snow and temperature conditions from being the determining factor in the survival of perennials. As an aside, keep in mind that factors other than those that can be remedied by mulching may affect the survival of a perennial. Examples of these other factors would be 1) unseasonably warm weather conditions late into the fall that may keep some plants from going dormant before winter sets in, especially if this is paired with continued fall applications of high nitrogen fertilizer, 2) low winter temperatures coupled with little snow cover may encourage more rodent activity in the root zone of perennials or 3) poor growing conditions (too dry, too wet, not enough fertilizer, etc.) during the growing season that may weaken a perennial .

We have had considerable success mulching our potted perennials and our perennial beds with row crop fabric. The row crop fabric that we use is a porous, 1.5 oz / square yard, white fabric that allows 50% light transmission through to the plants underneath it and also allows water to pass through. The temperature under this fabric is 6 – 8 degrees F. warmer than ambient. It also helps deter moisture loss. We water the soil in the pots or the beds well before we cover with the mulch. We anchor the mulch along the edges with rocks or 2x4 lumber. We wait until about the end of September to do the mulching so that temperatures are fairly cool. Because light and water pass through the mulch fabric, it can be left in place until major frost damage is past (usually late April-early May).

For gardeners living in the coldest microclimates in the Fairbanks area, it may be wise to add a layer of straw mulch on top of the row crop fabric. Straw is a very effective insulator, so it is best to remove it as soon as possible in the spring (April) so that it does not prevent the soil from warming as temperatures rise. However, the underlying layer of row crop fabric should not be removed until frost danger is past. In this situation the row crop fabric has the added function of keeping the straw from contacting the perennial garden. This prevents weed seeds in the straw from invading the garden and it also facilitates spring clean up since the row crop fabric can be rolled up and taken elsewhere to shake off any remaining straw and seeds.

Mulching is often crucial to the winter survival of perennials that are planted up against a building and within the shelter of the eaves where they never receive any snow cover naturally. In this situation row crop fabric

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topped with a layer of straw is one solution but covering with row crop fabric and then shoveling fluffy snow on top of it is also very effective as well as a cleaner and easier process. Shoveling fluffy snow (not packed) on to perennial areas as a mulch and not trafficking the snow that does cover perennials are both excellent ways to enhance perennial winter survival rates.

Oftentimes it is the conditions during late fall and early spring that affect a plant's winter survival more than the absolute winter temperatures. This is because repeated thawing and freezing can be very detrimental. This is another great advantage of the row crop fabric because it allows the mulch to be put on early in the fall and removed late in the spring avoiding the fickle freezes and thaws associated with the change of seasons.