

## Pine Straw / Pine Needle Mulch

In the southeastern United States, gardeners pay big money for pine needles. In Texas, for example people are willing to give \$15 for a bale of “pine straw” that covers only a 10’ by 10’ patch of garden. One local exclusive gated community in Truckee, CA was observed importing tractor-trailers of baled pine needles, from Georgia. Our own landfill up Cabin Creek rd. sells massive bales of pine needles if you need any. The Hosta growers associations recommend Pine straw as the best mulch for Hostas and many gardening magazines and books tout the numerous benefits of this glorious mulch that we have in abundance.

Anyone who has ever been to any of our gardening classes knows that we believe in low maintenance, drought tolerance and responsible gardening practices. We never miss an opportunity to mention mulch – “oh by the way, did I mention that you NEED to mulch”. The mantra goes: water less, weed less, fertilize less and plants grow twice as fast... mulch, mulch, mulch...

According to pine straw distributors pine straw is “one of the most widely used mulches for all size projects ranging from residential flower beds to industrial complexes and highway landscapes”. Like many other excellent organic mulches, pine needles:

- allow for gas exchange at the soil surface (oxygen is as important to roots as water is)
- Insulate roots from temperature swings , frost, sun, cold and hot.
- Conserve moisture by shading the soil and by slowing the wind
- Allow for gentle water infiltration
- Reduce erosion from rain-splash impact by dissipating droplets into a fine mist
- Suppress weeds

“the fine texture and uniform color of pine straw is simply more aesthetically pleasing”

So why does everyone work so hard to get rid of pine needles here?. I guess, Because we have so many. I understand, but please, take a moment and consider some of the benefits and try mulching at least a portion of your yard and garden with them.

Rather than fresh pine straw, I prefer a slightly finer texture and darker mulch. If you pile your pine needles in a corner of your yard and water occasionally over the summer, you will have finer textured dark mulch. (see Compost below).

Plants that grow well with pine needle mulch or pine straw include:

Bluebell, Blueberry, Bog Rosemary, Columbine, Currant, Dogwood, Fir, Hardy Azalea, Hardy Geranium, Hosta, Lupine, Masterwort, Meadow Rue, Monkshood, Mountain Ash, Ostrich Fern, Pine, Regale Lily, Rhododendron, Spruce and Western River Birch. Many of these plants are considered “acid loving” but many simply prefer fungal compost.

If you are still awake, you should be asking about pine needles in your defensible space. Fresh pine needles burn. Defensible space is managed vegetation and combustibles around your home. Pine needles should used well away from the sides of your house. Out in the garden, a dense row of deciduous shrubs with a layer of decaying pine needle mulch should not constitute a problem. If you are concerned, use only composted needles. Mulch allows your garden to grow more lush and a lush garden is more resistive to fire. If you are unaware of your immediate responsibility to maintain defensible space, please call the Truckee Fire District for more information. The Villager Nursery can provide you with the list of mountain hardy and fire resistive plants that we gleaned from fire protection agency lists throughout the coldest regions of the northern hemisphere.

## Free Compost

It is said of composting: “pile it and it will rot”. This is true. Even in our short cold summers, all organic matter eventually turns into decent compost. It may take several summers, but it will rot. If, however, you provide the slightest aid, you can have excellent composts, suitable for mulch, in a just one summer.

Composting does not require an advanced science degree, nor is it voodoo. Billions and billions of naturally occurring bacteria, fungi and the other beneficent characters easily do all the work. These organisms eat the organic matter you feed them and then they eat each other – the resulting blend of microscopic manures is our compost. Digested, re-digested, and digested again so that the huge connecting patterns of molecules that we see as pine needles are broken down. The mineral components of “the stuff previously known as pine needle” is Humus. Humus is, by definition, the mineralized product of decomposed organic material.

It is worth mentioning that differing organisms digest different organic materials. Woody materials, like pine needles, make largely fungal composts, the preferred mulch of many mountain hardy plants.

As to the story that pine needles make your soil acidic: Soil is formed from the degradation of the base rocks – lots of different kinds, and then rivers or glaciers or wind moved it around (transported soil). If the base rock is acidic, the soil will be acidic. The pH of composted pine needles is near 6.5 – the ideal pH for most plants. Which came first, the soil or the tree?

Very simply, the good and rapid composting organisms need Carbon (“brown”, pine needles), Nitrogen (“green”, grass clippings, kitchen greens), water and air (the reason we turn compost). If you pile your pine needles, mix in a few grass clippings and/or sprinkle in a little organic fertilizer (Dr.Earth is a brand of fertilizer with billions of living composters in it), and water occasionally, you will be able to dig into the pile this fall and use the rich dark semi-composted pine needles for your pre-winter mulching. If you turn the pile once or twice during the summer and add a little more water or greens, then it will be broken down faster. Try it.



While it is a good idea to mow your lawn high and let most of the clippings fall, I actually bag mine about half the time because they are so good in my compost. I keep a pile of pine needles close by to layer between each load of clippings. The pine needles maintain air spaces in the pile and accelerate the composting dramatically.

Did I mention that you need to mulch?

Eric Larusson is co-owner of the Villager Nursery with over 30 years of mountain gardening experiments under his trowel. He holds degrees in Molecular Biology/Botany and Agriculture/Horticulture and is one of the instructors for the “Mountain Gardening Seminar and Workshop Series” offered at the Villager Nursery spring through fall. [www.villagernursery.com](http://www.villagernursery.com)