

the dirt



SUMMER 2021 GARDENING NEWSLETTER

Get your mulch on.

It's like sunscreen for your yard.

Mulch has many unseen benefits for your garden. It reduces the evaporation of water from your soil to help keep irrigation needs to a minimum. It nourishes the soil, feeding your plants the nutrients they need to grow. It suppresses weeds. (So long, weed pulling.) And like sunscreen, it protects plant roots against sunburn and extreme temperatures.

Mulch comes in bags or in bulk, and can be purchased from virtually any local gardening store. You can also shred the leaves in your yard to make your own.

No matter what the source, be sure to apply 2 to 4 inches

of mulch to be effective—but make sure to keep it away from the base of plants and trees to prevent them from rotting.

There are two types of mulch. Organic mulch yields the many benefits listed above and includes shredded wood, bark, leaves, etc. Stone mulch, which is usually composed of gravel, rock or decomposed granite, also saves water, suppresses weeds, and serves as a "sunscreen" for your plants. While providing long-lasting beauty to your yard, it does not add nutrients to the soil like organic mulch.

If you live in an area at high risk for wildfires, your choice of mulch is important. Keep organic mulch at least 3 feet away from anything combustible, and use stone mulch against your home.



Tips to ‘firescape’ your home.



IRWD: Wildfires in California have been growing in intensity and impact in recent years. What can residents in our high-fire-risk, rural and canyon communities do to protect their homes from brush fires?

Huerta: Start by creating a buffer zone between your house and the wildland area that surrounds it. In most cases, it’s not the flames that burn a home, but the wind-whipped embers and firebrands that fall on combustible material on or near homes and ignite. Keep the area near your home free of pine needles, leaves and other debris. This includes spaces you might not regularly consider, such as rain gutters and spaces on the roof. For more information, visit the National Fire Prevention Association website at nfpa.org.

IRWD: Are trees and plants near a home a problem?

Huerta: They can be. Some plant material is extremely flammable, while other species are fire resistant. Create a 100-foot safety zone around your home or to your property line, where you should remove or mow all dead plants, grass and weeds. Remove branches that are within 10 feet of your

Juan Huerta | Senior Fire Prevention Specialist

Senior Fire Prevention Specialist Juan Huerta works in the Community Wildfire Mitigation section of the Orange County Fire Authority, where he helps high-fire-risk, rural and canyon communities protect themselves from wildfires.

chimney outlet. Around windows and under decks, remove vegetation that could catch fire. Learn more about plant separation at bit.ly/OCFA-plantseparation.

IRWD: What else can be done to protect the home?

Huerta: Be sure to check gable vents, eaves, and other places where hot embers can collect and spark a fire. Put a 1/8-inch mesh screen in front of open vents and spaces to prevent firebrands and embers from getting in. Our website has an online home assessment form that can help you keep your home safe. Visit OCFA.org/RSG/HomeAssessment.

IRWD: What are some popular fire-resistant plants for our climate?

Huerta: Hardwood, maple, poplar and cherry trees are less flammable than pine, fir and other conifers. Select fire-resistant shrubs such as sumac, currant and hedging roses or bush honeysuckle. For a list of recommended plants, visit OCFA’s planting guide at bit.ly/OCFA-plantguide. Undesirable plants can be found at bit.ly/OCFA-flammableplants.

For more information, contact us at 714-573-6774 or rsgoc@OCFA.org.

Heart-leaved penstemon,
Keckiella cordifolia

Container gardens will grow on you.

Beginner tips for cultivating fruits and vegetables in small spaces.

Vegetables, berries and fruit trees can grow plentifully without the hassle of backbreaking digging. Anyone, even those with a small patio, can take advantage of container gardens.

Citrus is one of the fruits that grows well in small spaces, and these trees can adapt easily to confined roots in pots and flourish year-round.

- Find space with ample sunlight. Citrus trees need direct light at least seven to eight hours a day. A lack of sun will make the tree susceptible to diseases and pests.
- Choose a container or planter with good drainage, and be sure not to overwater.
- Trees generally take a year or so to settle in and produce a crop, so be patient with the planting process. Fertilize three or four times a year to ensure that the plant is well-nourished.

Strawberries are another fruit that does well in containers. Use June-bearing varieties for summer berries, and everbearing varieties for yields in spring, summer and fall.

- Gather your materials, including a watering pipe, fertilizer, potting soil and a pot. Fertilizer should be mixed in with the potting soil and moistened before planting.
- The strawberry plant should be placed in full sun but kept evenly moist.
- The crown of the plant should be slightly above the soil.

For additional resources on container gardening,

visit the UCCE Master Gardeners of Orange County website at mgorange.ucanr.edu or the Great Park Garden Coalition at gpgardencoalition.org.





Juan's tip of the season.

Take advantage of the Turf Be Gone rebate.

Did you know there are various climate-appropriate groundcovers and plants that can use less than half the water a typical lawn requires? For example, there are perennial groundcovers such as *Dymondia margaretae* (also known as silver carpet, because of its green and silvery leaves), the aromatic and purple flowering creeping thyme, and, my favorite, Kurapia.



Purple flowering creeping thyme

Another favorite is the dwarf succulent plant *Ruschia lineolata*, which grows very densely and is extremely durable.



Looking ahead.

Summer garden to-do list.



- **Remove grass by creating a lasagna garden:** Try this organic gardening technique that results in rich, fluffy soil over time. Simply cover your lawn in layers of organic materials that will easily break down. This will result in nutrient-rich soil that will help your plants thrive.
- **Use brown and green materials for composting:** Brown materials can consist of paper, cardboard, shredded wood and dried leaves. Greens could be garden trimmings, vegetable scraps, and coffee grounds.
- **Test sprinklers and water lines:** Summer is the high peak of watering so check *WateringGuide.com* for expert advice. To ensure that plants get the correct amount of water, be sure to test irrigation systems and check for any broken sprinklers, broken water lines or clogged drip lines.

Participate in our webinars and community events.

July 7 | Noon | Composting 101. Join us for a webinar presentation by UCCE OC Master Gardeners and learn the basics of traditional composting and vermicomposting (using earthworms). Sign up at RightScape.com/events.

Aug. 18 | Noon | Control Your Controller. Explore popular weather-based sprinkler controllers and discuss their pros and cons. Sign up at RightScape.com/events.

Tap RightScape resources.

Visit RightScape.com for rebates to help offset the cost of turf removal, weather-based irrigation controllers, efficient sprinkler heads, drip kits and more. Plus, check out our plant database at RightScapeResources.com.

About The Dirt.

The Dirt is a quarterly gardening resource from Irvine Ranch Water District, created to help you grow a more beautiful, water-efficient garden. Each newsletter brings you seasonal tips to keep plants thriving all year long.

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