



## Product Guidelines for Certified All-Natural Horticultural Mulches

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# Mulch & Soil Council Product Guidelines for Certified All-Natural Horticultural Mulches



These Uniform Product Guidelines (UPG) are voluntary All-Natural Horticultural Mulch product standards and definitions. MSC members are expected to subscribe to these guidelines in principle.

Companies enrolled in the MSC Certified All-Natural Mulch Program **MUST** adopt and follow these guidelines as mandatory standards as part of the program registration and licensing requirements.

## Part I. Purpose and History

The purpose of these Uniform Product Guidelines is to promote:

1. Uniform terminology and labeling that enables industry, consumers, buyers, and regulators to achieve a common understanding of All-Natural horticultural mulch products and product ingredients
2. Fair and open competition in the mulch production and sales industry
3. Standards for product performance that enable individuals to understand and choose the best product for their application.

## Part II. Product Categories

Subject to the labeling requirements defined in Part III and product terms and definitions described in the Glossary of Terms (Part IV), mulch products are divided into one of the following product categories:

### A. MULCH

Any product or material except peat or peat moss, that is advertised, offered for sale, or sold for primary use as a horticultural, above-ground dressing<sup>2</sup>.

### B. ALL-NATURAL MULCH

Any horticultural mulch product made from Forest Products, Wood Manufacturing By-Products, Tree Trimmings, and/or Yard Waste THAT DO NOT exceed 0.2% foreign matter by volume, use mulch blends that contain any reprocessed wood, and/or contain any inorganic or unnatural paints, stains, colorants and/or chemicals.

## Part: III: General Product Labeling

The MSC recognizes the following labeling requirements for all Horticultural mulches. The source of these requirements is specified.

- 1) All products must have a label that declares the product identity. (AAPFCO<sub>3</sub>, NIST<sub>2</sub>)
- 2) Product names, ingredient names, and label terminology must conform to the product definitions of this guideline. (MSC<sub>1</sub>)
- 3) Product names that incorporate or refer to a single specific species/material must be comprised of 100% of that species/material (with a 10% investigational allowance when tested). (MSC<sub>1</sub>)
- 4) Product names that list a specific species/material as “first-mentioned” among other species/materials must be comprised of more than 50% of that product. (AAPFCO<sub>3</sub>) Lack of verifiable method for accurately testing percentage of mixed species/materials precludes MSC certifying blended content claims.
- 5) Product names that list a component material or materials on other than a first-mentioned basis must be comprised of at least 10% of the named material(s) and such materials shall be listed in the name in the declining order of their volume content. (AAPFCO<sub>3</sub>, MSC<sub>1</sub>)
- 6) A product label shall appear on each product bag. Product labels shall contain an ingredient statement that lists the individual ingredients in declining order by percent of volume as determined by the quantity statement. Individual ingredients must comply with accepted terms in Part IV (Glossary of Terms) of these guidelines. The specific percentage of product volume of each listed material need not be given on the product label, unless otherwise required by states. (MSC<sub>1</sub>)
- 7) All product packaging and labeling shall conform to requirements of NIST Handbook 130 (2025 Edition) and NIST Handbook 133 (2025 Edition) and each successive edition<sup>2</sup>.
- 8) All products shall conform to AAPFCO Official Publication No. 78 (2025)<sup>3</sup> and each successive edition as well as the standards and guidelines of the MSC, and all product claims made must be independently verifiable using repeatable scientific methods.
- 9) Colorized Products must conform to the definitions and guidelines for the product name claimed.(MSC<sub>1</sub>)
- 10) Mulch or soil products shall not contain Chromated Copper Arsenate-treated (CCA) wood or any ingredients whose original manufacturer recommends against grinding or mulching. (MSC<sub>1</sub>)

## Part IV: Glossary of Terms

**Aged:** exposed to weathering and/or natural decay.

**Bark:** the corky exterior covering of trees, including the cambium, with a maximum wood content (interior xylem) of 15%.

**Brand or Product Name:** a specific designation applied to an individual product. (AAPFCO<sub>3</sub>)

**Cedar Mulch:** products derived 100% from trees of the genus *Thuja* or *Juniperus*.

**Compost** - is the product manufactured through the controlled aerobic, biological decomposition of biodegradable materials. The product has undergone mesophilic and thermophilic temperatures, which significantly reduces the viability of pathogens and weed seeds, and stabilizes the carbon, such that it is beneficial to plant growth. Compost is typically used as a soil amendment, but may also contribute plant nutrients. (AAPFCO<sub>3</sub>)

**Cypress Bark Mulch:** products derived from the genus *Taxodium* and a maximum wood content of 15%.

**Cypress Mulch:** products derived 100% from trees of the genus *Taxodium*.

**Foreign Matter:** metal, plastic, glass or other man-made materials that may appear in mulch or soil products from the processing/grinding of reprocessed/recycled materials or foreign matter embedded in natural forest products. All-Natural Mulch products shall not contain more than 0.2% by volume of foreign matter.

**Forest Products:** Untreated wood and its untreated by-products generated from the harvest of timber. These products may include lumber, sawdust, bark and similar materials but do not include reprocessed/recycled wood from consumer or industrial products. (AAPFCO<sub>3</sub>)

**Hardwood Bark Mulch:** products derived from deciduous hardwood trees and a maximum wood content of 15%.

**Hardwood Mulch:** products derived 100% from deciduous hardwood trees and/or shrubs.

**Hemlock Bark Mulch:** products derived from the genus *Tsuga* and a maximum wood content of 15%.

**Hemlock Mulch:** products derived 100% from the genus *Tsuga*.

**Mulch Blends:** Bark, wood products, or reprocessed wood products containing more than one genus or a mix of forest products and/or reprocessed wood that have been mechanically screened and/or shredded. **If reprocessed wood products are used in any portion of a blend, such use must be indicated on the product ingredient label.**

**Mulch:** Any product or material except peat or peat moss, that is advertised, offered for sale, or sold for primary use as a horticultural, above-ground dressing; for decoration, moisture control, weed control, erosion control, temperature control, or other similar purposes. (NIST<sub>2</sub>)

**Pine Bark Mulch:** products derived from the genus *Pinus* and a maximum wood content of 15%.

**Pine Bark Nuggets:** product derived from the genus *Pinus* with particle size from 0.25" to 3.0" in diameter and a maximum wood content of 15%.

**Pine Mulch:** products derived 100% from conifers of genus *Pinus*.

**Pine Straw:** The leaves (needles) from a conifer tree of the species *Pinus*.

**Processed Mulch:** deliberately manipulated to modify or transform physical characteristics of the natural state of the substance.

**Product Label:** an information panel which shall be prominently displayed on the product packaging and conforms to the guidelines of MSC<sub>1</sub>, AAPFCO<sub>3</sub>, NIST<sub>2</sub> (Fair Packaging and Labeling Act & Uniform Package Labeling Regulation).

**Product Name:** the primary identification of a product given by the manufacturer and printed most prominently on the front of a product bag for the purpose of identifying the product to the consumer.

**Raw:** in the natural state, and not prepared, modified or manipulated for use.

**Reprocessed/Recycled Wood:** wood sourced from fabricated consumer or industrial products. Sources may include wood from pallets, construction and/or demolition materials that (1) have not been treated with preservatives, stain or paint; (2) contain no materials whose original manufacturer recommends against grinding or mulching; and (3) are not contaminated with any hazardous or other regulated substances.

(NOTE: Forest Products processed into mulch are NOT reprocessed/recycled wood.)

**Tree Trimmings:** wood materials from powerline clearing, storm damage, urban tree maintenance or other arboricultural practices that have not been mixed with other wood or non-wood materials.

**Western Bark Mulch:** products derived from conifer trees common to the Western region of North America with no more than 15% wood content.

**Western Bark Nuggets:** products derived from conifer trees common to the Western region of North America with particle size from 0.25" to 3.00" in diameter, and a maximum wood content of 15%.

**Western Mulch:** products derived 100% from conifers common to the Western region of North America.

**Wood:** The interior hard fibrous (cellulosic) xylem of trees.

**Wood Mulch:** See Mulch Blend

**Wood Manufacturing By-products:** unstained, unpainted and/or untreated wood by-products, tailings or residuals generated from the manufacturing of wood products such as wood moldings, trusses, lumber rejects, furniture residues, and similar manufacturing facilities utilizing forest products.

**Yard Waste:** wood materials including tree branches, twigs, shrubs, and other woody plant materials removed during gardening, landscaping, or yard maintenance that can be ground into a horticultural mulch. **Yard waste used for all-natural mulch must first remove all foreign matter before the grinding process.**

**References:**

<sup>1</sup>MSC, The Mulch & Soil Council Membership Approved Product Guidelines

<sup>2</sup>NIST, National Institute of Standards and Technology, Gaithersburg, MD. NIST Handbook 130 (2025) and NIST Handbook 133 (2025) and each successive edition

<sup>3</sup>AAPFCO, American Association of Plant Food Control Officials, West Lafayette, IN. Official Publication No. 78 (2025), and every subsequent edition and/or update