Uniform Product Guidelines For Horticultural Mulches, Growing Media & Landscape Soils

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Mulch & Soil Council
Uniform Product Guidelines

These ***Uniform Product Guidelines for Horticultural Mulches, Growing Media & Landscape Soils*** (UPG) are voluntary product standards and definitions adopted by the industry and maintained by the Mulch & Soil Council (MSC). MSC members are expected to subscribe to these guidelines in principle. However, companies enrolled in the MSC Product Certification Program MUST adopt these guidelines as mandatory standards as part of the program registration and licensing requirements for certified products.

Part I: Purpose

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 mulch and soil products and product ingredients
2) Fair and open competition in the mulch and soil industry
3) Standards for product performance that enable individuals to understand and choose the best product for their application.
4) The UPG is for industry guidelines and certification program requirements only and do not represent, convey or attest to compliance with any federal, state or local laws, regulations or other requirements.

Part II: Product Categories

Subject to the labeling requirements defined in UPG Part IV: General Product Labeling and product terms and definitions described in Part V: Glossary of Terms, mulch and soil products are divided into one of the following product categories:

1) **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$_2$).

2) **HORTICULTURAL GROWING MEDIA:** Any substance or mixture of substances which is promoted as or is intended to function as a commercial or consumer growing media for the managed growth of horticultural crops in containers. (AAPFCO$_3$)
   a) **Potting Soil/Mix, Premium:** Any horticultural growing medium that actively promotes the growth and/or vigor of plants in containers, provides physical support for the plants and a means to exchange air, water and nutrients. (MSC$_1$)
   b) **Potting Soil/Mix, Standard:** Any horticultural growing medium that provides physical support for plants in containers and a means to exchange air, water and nutrients. (MSC$_1$)
   c) **Soil, Specialty:** Any material designed primarily as a seed starter based on directions for use. (MSC$_1$)

3) **LANDSCAPE SOIL & SOIL AMENDMENTS:** Any product or material advertised, offered for sale or sold for primary use as an in-ground soil amendment or conditioner that may be made from but is not limited to natural soils, bark, coir, digestate, forest products, peat, humus, compost, and/or manure. It may include fertilizer, pesticides, and/or additives intended as soil conditioners(MSC$_1$
   a) **Soil, Specialty:** Any material designed primarily as a seed starter based on directions for use. (MSC$_1$)

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Part III: General Product Requirements

The MSC recognizes the following product requirements for all mulches, horticultural growing media, and landscape soils/amendments. The source of these requirements is specified.

1) All product claims made must be accurate for the product category and independently verifiable using repeatable scientific methods. (MSC_1)

2) Mulch and soil products shall not contain Chromated Copper Arsenate-treated (CCA) wood or any ingredients whose original manufacturer recommends against grinding or mulching. (MSC1)

3) Mulch and soil products shall not contain heavy metals that exceed limits set by the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in Title 40, Code of Federal Regulations, Part 503, Table 3. (MSC1)

4) Private Label Owners shall ensure that co-packed products are manufactured to Mulch & Soil Council requirements. (MSC1)

5) All products must comply with all applicable state and federal laws and regulations. (MSC_1)

6) All product terms or definitions not covered in these or other MSC guidelines shall conform to the most current published editions of the National Institutes of Science and Technology (NIST) Handbooks 130 & 133 and Association of American Plant Food Control Officials (AAPFCO) Official Publication (OP). (MSC_1)

Part IV: Product Labeling

The objective of labeling is to inform the consumer on what is in the product as specifically as possible for all inputs. The MSC recognizes the following labeling requirements for all mulches, horticultural growing media, and landscape soils/amendments. The source of these requirements is specified.

1) All products must have a label that includes:
    a. Brand name
    b. Product name
    c. Product identity (if not incorporated in the product name)
        i. The common or usual name or in the absence of this, the generical name or
        ii. Other appropriate description including a general statement of UPG category such as mulch, growing media/potting soil or soil amendment
    d. Quantity statement in metric, may include U.S. customary as optional
        i. Mulch: Fractional quantities less than one cubic foot are permitted as a recognized industry trade custom, i.e. 0.75 cu ft
        ii. Soil: Dry quart measures greater than one cubic foot are permitted as a recognized trade custom, i.e., 32 dry qt, 60 dry qt
    e. Name & address of responsible party
        i. Only private label owners may determine if a co-packer is listed as the responsible party on the label.
    f. An ingredient statement for all products with two or more inputs, that lists the individual ingredients in declining order of predominance according to the method of sale. The specific percentage of product volume/weight of each listed material need not be given on the product label, unless otherwise required by states
        i. If the name of the product fully identifies all inputs, an ingredient statement is not required.

ii. Any product using post-consumer/post-industrial reprocessed/recycled wood must identify that input in an ingredient statement

(MSC_1, $NIST_2$, AAPFCO3)

2) Product identity and nomenclature must align with these guidelines and definitions or the latest AAPFCO OP unless otherwise mandated by state or federal requirements. (MSC1)

3) All aspects of product labels must be truthful and accurate including (but not limited to) product claims, name, contents and intended use. (MSC1)

4) Product names that refer to a single specific species or material must be comprised of 100% of that species or material. (MSC1)

5) If the name of a multi-component product incorporates or refers to a single specific input, the product must be predominantly comprised of that input in accordance with the method of sale. The name must also include a qualifier such as blend, mix, etc. (MSC1)

6) If the name of a multi-component product incorporates or refers to more than one input, it must describe the predominant inputs and list them in declining order of predominance according to the method of sale. Named inputs must be at least 10% of the total contents according to the method of sale. If the name does not include all the inputs greater than 10%, it must also include a qualifier such as blend, mix, etc. (MSC1)

7) Product Names that incorporate the word “Blend” must use the same type size as the product name it modifies. (MSC1)

8) Product labels that include a specific plant or animal ingredient by picture, graphic, drawing, or any means other than by name (i.e., cow, sheep, poultry, mushroom, redwood, pine, etc.) shall be predominantly comprised of that specific plant or animal ingredient as part of its total content in accordance with the method of sale. (MSC1, AAPFCO3)

9) All product labeling not covered in these or other MSC guidelines shall conform to the most current published editions of the National Institutes of Science and Technology (NIST) Handbooks 130 & 133 and AAPFCO OP. (MSC_1)

Part V: Glossary of Terms

Aged: Exposed to weathering and/or natural decay. (AAPFCO3)

Bark: The corky exterior covering of trees, including the cambium, with a maximum wood content (interior xylem) of 15%. (MSC1)

Beneficial Substances: a substance or compound other than primary, secondary, and micro plant nutrients that can be demonstrated by scientific research to be beneficial to one or more species of plants, soil or media. ($AAPFCO_3$)

Biochar: Is a solid material obtained from thermochemical conversion of biomass in an oxygen-limited environment (pyrolysis) containing at least 60% carbon. Feedstocks may be composed of crop residue, wood or other forest waste, and animal manures. Materials transported in salt water, painted, or treated

with preservatives are not permitted. When listing biochar in an ingredient statement, the feedstock shall be designated by prefixing the term biochar with the feedstock from which it was produced; ie. poultry litter biochar, green waste biochar, paper mill biochar, etc. When more than one feedstock is involved, all feedstocks greater than 10% of the total volume are to be listed by decreasing volume. Their uses include soil amendments. (AAPFCO3)

Biosoilds (Sewerage Sludge): A primary organic solid material produced by wastewater treatment (sewerage sludge) processes that can be beneficially recycled for its plant nutrient content and soil amending characteristics. ($AAPFCO_3$) (See Soil Amendments)

Brand or Product Name: A specific designation applied to an individual product. (AAPFCO3)

Coir: The processed husk of coconuts (Cocos nucifera) consisting of pith and/or fiber ($AAPFCO_3$)

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. (AAPFCO3)

Container Soil/Mix: (See Potting Soil/Mix and Growing Media, Horticultural)

Digestate: Is the liquid or solid material processed through anaerobic digestion. Labeling digestate materials shall be designated by prefixing the name of the feedstock from which it is produced, i.e. cow manure digestate, biosolids digestate, etc. (AAPFCO3)

Digested Dairy Fiber: (See Digestate)

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. (MSC_1)

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 fabricated consumer or industrial products. (AAPFCO3)

Formula: A fixed composition of inputs.

Garden Soil: (See Landscape Soil)

Growing Media, Horticultural: Any substance or mixture of substances which is promoted as or is intended to function as a commercial or consumer growing media for the managed growth of horticultural crops in containers. (AAPFCO3) (See Potting Soil/Mix and Soil, Specialty)

Humus: A material that is used for soil conditioning and is derived primarily from the decomposition of plant and animal matter in such manner that origin of the material is not recognizable. It shall have a conductance of less than 5.5 millimhos/cm (mmhos/cm) and a pH in the range of 3.7 – 7.5 as determined by the saturated paste method. ($AAPFCO_3$

Labeling: Any advertising, promotional or promotion of any product including but not limited to all written, printed, graphic or electronic communication used in promoting the product must be truthful and accurate. (MSC1)

Landscape Soil: Any product or material advertised, offered for sale or sold for primary use as an in-ground soil amendment or conditioner that may be made from but is not limited to natural soils, bark, coir, digestate, forest products, peat, humus, compost, and/or manure. It may include fertilizer, and/or additives intended as soil conditioners. (MSC1)

Local or Locally: refers to a 200-mile proximity. (MSC_1)

Manure, Animal: Dried, pulverized, shredded, composted, or otherwise processed, manipulated, or treated animal manures are the excreta of animals together with whatever organic bedding or other materials are needed to follow good animal husbandry practices in order to maintain proper sanitary conditions, to conserve plant food elements in the excreta, and to absorb the liquid portion without the addition of other material. (MSC_1) (See Soil Amendment)

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. (NIST2)

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. (MSC_1)

Mulch, Cedar: Products derived 100% from trees of the genus Thuja or Juniperus. (MSC1)

Mulch, Cypress: products derived 100% from trees of the genus Taxodium. (MSC1)

Mulch, Cypress Bark: products derived from the genus Taxodium and a maximum wood content of 15%. (MSC1)

Mulch, Hardwood: products derived 100% from deciduous hardwood trees and/or shrubs. (MSC_1)

Mulch, Hardwood Bark: products derived from deciduous hardwood trees and a maximum wood content of 15%. (MSC_1)

Mulch, Hemlock: products derived 100% from the genus Tsuga. (MSC_1)

Mulch, Hemlock Bark: products derived from the genus Tsuga and a maximum wood content of 15%. (MSC_1)

Mulch, Leaf: A horticultural mulch composed predominantly of collected leaves or leaf-derived material that may be whole, shredded, ground, aged, partially decomposed, or otherwise processed for application to the soil surface (MSC_1)

Mulch, Pine: products derived 100% from conifers of genus Pinus. (MSC_1)

Mulch, Pine Bark: products derived from the genus Pinus and a maximum wood content of 15%. (MSC_1)

Mulch, 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%. (MSC_1)

Mulch, Pine Straw: The leaves (needles) from a conifer tree of the species Pinus. (MSC_1)

Mulch, Stump & Root: products derived 100% from the processing of tree stumps and/or plant roots. (MSC_1)

Mulch, Western: products derived 100% from conifers common to the Western region of North America. (MSC_1)

Mulch, Western Bark: products derived from conifer trees common to the Western region of North America with no more than 15% wood content. (MSC_1)

Mulch, 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%. (MSC_1)

Mulch, Wood: (See Mulch Blend)

Mushroom Compost: A soil product derived from the inclusion of spent mushroom compost substrate or a spent mushroom substrate that has been composted. (MSC_1)

Mushroom, Spent Substrate: The spent/depleted growing media from the production of mushrooms. (MSC_1)

Peat: A partly decayed vegetable matter of natural occurrence. It is composed chiefly of organic matter that contains some nitrogen of low activity. ($AAPFCO_3$) (See Potting Soil, Landscape Soil and Soil Amendment.).

Peat Moss: Naturally occurring material formed chiefly from the partial decomposition of moss plants and organic matter in a water-saturated environment. (MSC_1) (See Potting Soil/Mix, Landscape Soil and Soil Amendment.)

Peat Moss, Sphagnum: A material obtained from a sphagnum peat deposit (bog) of which an oven dried sample contains a minimum of 66-2/3% sphagnum moss fiber by weight. Those fibers shall be stems and leaves that have recognizable fibrous and cellular structure. (AAPFCO3) (See Potting Soil/Mix, Landscape Soil and Soil Amendment.)

Perlite, Horticultural: A unique volcanic aluminosilicate mineral which expands 13 times its original volume when it is heated to a temperature of approximately 1,600° F. It is commonly used as a potting mix ingredient or separately as a medium for rooting cuttings or for hydroculture. (MSC_1)

Planting Mix: (See Growing Media, Horticultural or Landscape Soil)

Potting Mix: (See Growing Media, Horticultural)

Potting Soil/Mix, Premium: A horticultural growing medium that actively promotes the growth and/or vigor of plants in containers, provides physical support for the plants and a means to exchange air, water and nutrients. (MSC_1) (See Growing Media, Horticultural

Potting Soil/Mix, Professional: A premium horticultural growing medium used in commercial container production businesses with documented sales to professional growers of these establishments. (MSC_1) (See Growing Media, Horticultural)

Potting Soil/Mix, Standard: A horticultural growing medium that provides physical support for plants in containers and a means to exchange air, water and nutrients. (MSC_1) (See Growing Media, Horticultural.

Processed: Deliberately treated or manipulated to modify or transform physical, chemical, or biological characteristics of the natural state of the substance. (MSC_1)

Product Label: Any informational display of all written, printed, or graphic matter in relation to a product that may be printed on the bag containing the product, printed on a sticker placed on the bag, or printed on a flyer or tag attached to the bag or supplied to the customer at time of delivery. At minimum it must contain brand name, product name, product identity, quantity statement, and name and address of responsible party. Additional requirements for compliance may be found in the Fair Packaging and Labeling Act, NIST Uniform Packaging and Labeling Regulation, MSC Uniform Product Guidelines, AAPFCO Official Publication, and state specific regulations. (MSC_1)

Product Name: The primary identification of a product created by the manufacturer and prominently displayed on a product label. Naming convention must meet all applicable requirements. (MSC_1)

Raw: In the natural state, and not prepared, modified or manipulated for use. ($AAPFCO_3$)

Reprocessed/Recycled Wood: Wood sourced from fabricated post-consumer or post-industrial products. Sources may include (but are not limited to) 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.) (MSC_1)

Seed Starter: A special purpose soil product formulated for growing of plants from seed (MSC_1) (See Growing Media, Horticultural and Landscape Soil)

Soil: Any product or material except peat or peat moss that is advertised or offered for sale or sold for primary use as a horticultural growing media, soil amendment, and/or soil replacement. (NIST2)

Soil Amendment: Any substance or mixture of substances which is intended to improve the physical, biochemical, biological or other characteristics of the soil, except fertilizers, agricultural liming materials, unmanipulated animal manures, unmanipulated vegetable manures, pesticides and other materials exempted by regulation. (AAPFCO3)

Soil Conditioner: (See Soil Amendment)

Soilless: Without naturally occurring earth soil such as topsoil, mineral soil, clay, and silt. (MSC_1)

Tree Trimmings: wood materials from powerline clearing, storm damage, urban tree maintenance or other arboricultural practices. (MSC_1)

Vermiculite, Horticultural: An aluminosilicate mineral, heat-treated to form expanded or 'exfoliated' granules with very low bulk density and a laminated structure that allows for good aeration and water retention. (MSC_1)

Water-holding Polymer: Polyacrylamides, polyvinyl alcohols, starches and other substances, specifically manufactured to increase water retention in soil or substrates. (MSC_1)

Wetting Agent: A liquid or granular compound applied to horticultural mixes to improve their ability to absorb, hold and/or distribute water. (MSC_1)

Wood: The interior hard fibrous (cellulosic) xylem of trees. (MSC_1)

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. (MSC_1)

Yard Waste: organic materials including tree branches, twigs, leaves, grass clippings, shrubs, and other woody plant materials removed during gardening, landscaping, or yard maintenance that can be composted or ground into a horticultural mulch. Yard waste used for all-natural mulch must first remove all foreign matter before the grinding process. (MSC_1)

References:

[1] MSC, The Mulch & Soil Council-Membership Approved
[2] NIST, National Institute of Standards and Technology, Gaithersburg, MD. Handbooks 130 and 133. NIST Handbook 130 (2026) and NIST Handbook 133 (2026) and each successive edition
[3] AAPFCO, American Association of Plant Food Control Officials, West Lafayette, IN. Official Publication No. 77 (2026), and every subsequent edition and/or update