Mulches

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Over the Top

Once upon a time, it was a struggle just to convince landscapers to use mulch around plantings. Gladly, those days are behind us, and mulch has gained acceptance in the industry. Seeing mulch specified in a planting plan no longer sends shivers down a contractor's spine. But more and more, newly planted sites and commercial landscapes are being "drowned" in mulch.

Mulch, mulch everywhere! It's piled high on trees and shrubs, burying groundcovers and obscuring the landscape.

The problem, of course, is this recent epidemic of what's known as "volcano" mulching: piles of mulch against the trunks of trees and shrubs, or mulch mounds with the center carefully scooped out but still piled 8 inches to 16 inches over the soil surrounding the plant.

Who knows why this practice became an unfortunate trademark of the landscaping industry? Perhaps it's because organic mulches are now in vogue, and plastic or fabric mulches have fallen out of favor. It could be the idea that if a little weed control is good, then a lot must be better.

There are good reasons for using mulch and it is valued for some very real benefits to the landscape. Mulch is used to control weeds, conserve moisture, increase water permeability, reduce run off and moderate soil temperatures. It also serves to protect the plant stem from string trimmers and mowers adding distance from mechanical injury. It can be attractive too, creating a clean line and separating plantings from the landscape.

Here are the best practices, which must be tailored to a site, the plant and type of mulch. These recommendations can serve as a foundation for a discussion on what *not* to do when mulching a landscape.

Volcanic Landscapes. We've all seen examples of volcano mulching. Whether a mound has developed over time or is from one application by an overzealous landscape crew it still creates problems.

The most obvious issue concerns placing mulch against the trunk. This practice keeps the bark moist. Bark is not designed to tolerate continuous moisture and wet bark is subject to attack by fungi or insects and decay. The exchange of carbon dioxide and oxygen between the living bark and the atmosphere can be restricted, suffocating the tree. Dormancy can be delayed in the fall by decomposing mulch and the risk of cold injury is increased. Rodents also find mulch an attractive shelter and feed on bark during a long winter.

As roots go, so goes the whole plant. When oxygen is less available, when the factors already discussed are present, the tree or shrub suffers and declines.

On a positive note, most mulch volcanoes contain enough material that, if broken down and spread to the proper depth, could provide a nice wide mulch apron. So go grab a rake and go level some volcanoes!

Mulch Best Practices

Mulch should be applied to a minimum 3-foot circle around individual trees. This means a minimum of 3 feet from the trunk to the edge of the mulch (or 6 feet across). Modify this to at least 12 inches beyond the periphery of the root ball for newly planted trees and shrubs, as well as out to the drip line of established trees, if possible. The goal is to maximize the area of soil under mulch that the roots can be encouraged to explore, particularly if on site stresses would normally limit root growth.

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As a rule, keep mulch, regardless of type, at least 3-6 inches away from the trunk of young trees and shrubs, and at least 8-12 inches away from the trunks of more mature trees. Don't mulch at all in wet or poorly drained sites.

Most importantly, don't apply mulch more than 2-4 inches deep, total. This means 2-4 inches of mulch above soil, measured from the proper soil level. If the soil is too high around the trunk or if the tree is planted too deeply, you might have even bigger problems.

Freshen or replace mulch every 2-3 years. Fine-textured mulches, such as sawdust, double-shredded bark or buckwheat hulls should be applied only 2-3 inches thick, while coarse-textured mulches such as nuggets or wood chips may be piled up to 4 inches.

Take care not to add these amounts to what is already in place. Measure, rake the surface of old mulch to improve its appearance, and then add fresh mulch to a *total* depth of 2-4 inches. Removal of old mulch is necessary only if it has compacted and sheds water. If needed, rake away and dispose of old decayed mulch. Put down the fresh product to the proper final depth.