

Mulch and Mulching

Mulching is one of the simplest ways that you can help create a better growing environment for trees and landscape plants in your yard. Mulch can help to maintain soil moisture, minimize weed growth and provide the soil with much needed organic matter. Applied improperly, mulch can be damaging and detrimental to the health of your landscape plants and trees.

Types of Mulch:

Organic

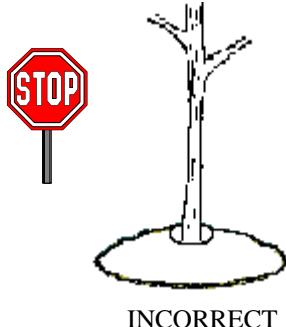
- Composted hardwood and softwood bark
- Composted hardwood and softwood chips
- Composted leaf litter
- Manure
- Pine needles
- Mushroom compost

Organic mulches improve the condition of the soil. They provide needed organic matter that helps keep the soil loose. As the mulch decomposes, important nutrients are replenished in the soil. This results in better root growth and water infiltration.

Organic mulch also insulates fine roots from temperature extremes and protects trees from lawn mower and weed eater injury (*an all too common and easily avoidable problem that causes serious damage and even death to many smaller trees*).

Problems with improper mulching

The most common problem today with mulching is overmulching, or “volcano mulching”. This occurs when mulch is piled up around the base of the trunk.

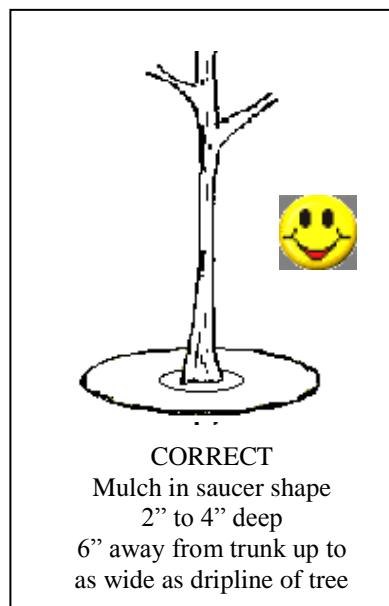


- “Volcano mulching” can lead to excessive moisture in the root zone and trunk tissues, causing rot, which can lead to tree death.
- Thick mulch layers can support weed growth as opposed to preventing it.
- Improper mulching can cause undesired surface root growth.
- Plastic and weed fabrics should not be used under the mulch layer. They prohibit nutrient and oxygen flow to the roots.

Inorganic

- Stone
- Lava rock
- Pulverized rubber

Inorganic mulches are installed primarily for aesthetic reasons and do not provide needed organic matter or essential nutrients for plant growth. Therefore, it is suggested that organic mulches be used for better plant health.



Tree Roots and Grass:

The relationship between trees and grass is one that is often overlooked. People don't realize that the two are interrelated and how we care for one greatly affects the other.

Grass is an important part of our landscape. We strive to have it be as lush and green as we possibly can. Some go to extreme measures to accomplish this goal.

Trees are also an important part of our landscape. We would like to see them grow to become majestic specimens that provide us with adequate shade and a host of other positive attributes.

One common landscape theme we find is trees with grass growing right up to the trunk. In this situation, neither the grass nor the tree benefits.

- Due to the high root density of the grass surrounding the tree, the grass out competes the tree for water and nutrients.
- The grass growing under the tree is being shaded out by the canopy above.
- Over 90% of the tree's roots are located in the top 18-inches of soil, putting them in direct competition with the grass roots, leading to poor growth of grass under the tree.

To promote healthy trees and maintain beautiful grass throughout your landscape, make sure there are mulch rings, preferably and where practical, out to the drip line, around all your trees and landscape plantings. By mulching you are eliminating some of the tree/grass competition. Your trees will show better growth and stay healthier and your grass will stay fuller and greener. If you choose to make a mulch ring please keep in mind the best course of action when making the ring is to not dig up all the grass around the tree but to lay approximately 4-inches of mulch down to smother the grass. By doing this the grass will be killed and upon breaking down will provide nutrients to the soil. Not digging the grass up also protects the delicate tree roots near the soil surface from being damaged or removed all together.

If there are large trees present where a mulch ring out to the drip line will occupy a large portion of the yard and you feel this may be unsightly, there are other options.

Should you not want to wait for the grass to decompose under a mulch layer, carefully remove the grass and plant perennial ground covers. Mulch can then be laid around the ground covers. The roots of ground covers don't compete as fiercely as grass with the tree for water and nutrients. Ground covers also offer the bonus of seasonal flowers, which will enhance the beauty of a landscape. Some common hardy ground covers that will do well here in this area are:

1. Pachysandra: Known for its pink to purple flowers in early spring.
2. Common Periwinkle: A vine like evergreen known for its lilac blue flowers that will bloom in the spring.
3. Barren Strawberry: Known for its showy yellow flowers in early summer.
4. Lamium: Variegated leaf with purple flowers in the spring and fall.
5. Euonymous fortunei: Known for its durability and dense semi-evergreen leaves.

These are just an example of the many ground covers you may use to improve both the health of your trees and the beauty of your landscape.

Preserving your trees with proper mulching is one of the most important tree maintenance techniques available. Begin today by considering the trees you may want to mulch this season.

Common Groundcovers



Photo Credit: ©Missouri Botanic Gardens

Pachysandra



Photo Credit: ©William S. Justice

Common Periwinkle



Photo Credit: Floraprint ®

Lamium



Photo Credit: ©Henderson-www.2bnthwind.com

Barren Strawberry



Photo Credit: ©Dr. Gary Watson

Tree Roots near the surface with grass cover vs. mulch cover

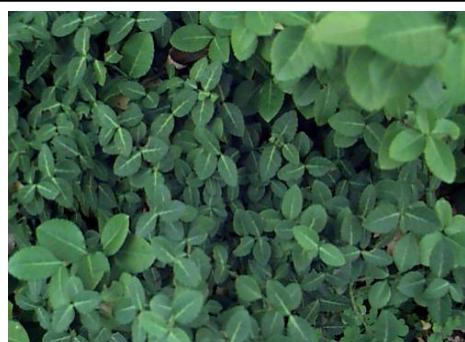


Photo Credit: University of Connecticut

Euonymus fortunei