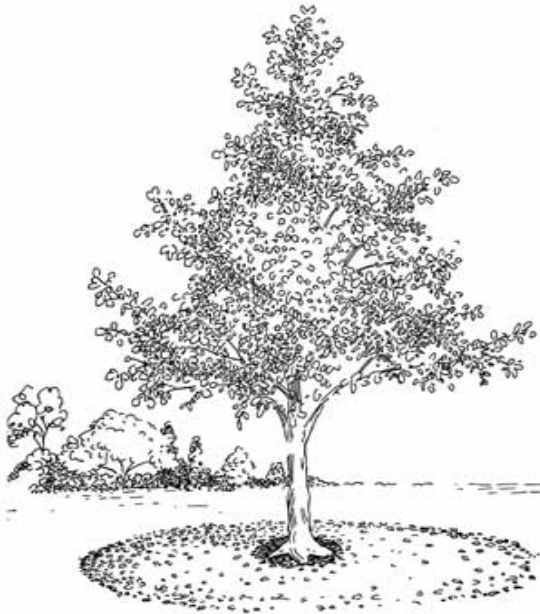


Proper Mulching Techniques



Mulch wide—not deep.

Mulches are material placed over the soil surface to maintain moisture and improve soil conditions. Mulching is one of the most beneficial things a homeowner can do for the health of a tree. Mulch can reduce water loss from the soil, minimize weed competition and improve soil structure. Properly applied, mulch can give landscapes a handsome, well-groomed appearance. Mulch must be applied properly; if it is too deep, or if the wrong material is used, it actually can cause significant harm to trees and other landscape plants.

The two major types of mulch are inorganic and organic. Inorganic mulches include various types of stone, lava rock, pulverized rubber, geotextile fabrics, and other material. Inorganic mulches do not decompose and do not need to be replenished often. They also do not improve soil structure, add organic material or provide nutrients. Most horticulturists and arborist prefer organic mulch over inorganic mulch.

Organic mulches include wood chips, pine needles, hardwood and softwood bark, cocoa hulls, leaves, compost mixes and many other products derived from plants. Organic mulches decompose in the landscape at different rates depending on the material and those that decompose faster must be replenished more often. Organic mulches improve soil quality and fertility. Most arborists and landscape professionals prefer this type of mulch.

The following are some guidelines to use when applying mulch to ensure the health of your trees and plants:

- For well drained sites, apply a 2 to 4 inch layer of mulch. If there is a drainage problem, a thinner layer should be used. Avoid placing mulch up against tree trunks. Mulch should be spread out beyond the tree's drip line
- Mulch wide not deep
- Organic mulches are preferred to inorganic mulches because of their soil-enhancing properties. When using organic mulches make sure that they are well aerated and composted to avoid sour-smelling mulch.
- Inspect plants and soil in the area to be mulched. Determination should be made whether the drainage is adequate and whether there are plants that may be affected by the choice of mulch. Most commonly available mulches work well in most landscapes, but some plants may benefit from the use of slightly acidifying mulch such as pine bark.
- If mulch is piled up against the stems or trunks of a tree, pull it back several inches so that the base of the trunk and the root crown is exposed.
- If mulch is already present, check the depth. Do not add mulch if there is a sufficient layer in place. Rake old mulch to break up any matted layers. This will also refresh its appearance.
- Composted wood chips can make good mulch, especially when they contain a blend of leaves, bark and wood. Fresh wood chip may be used around established trees and shrubs. It is best to avoid un-composted wood chips that have been piled deeply without exposure to oxygen.

For more information on proper mulching techniques, see the University of Illinois website at: <http://web.extension.uiuc.edu/champaign/homeowners/060331.html>.