

Mulch: A Tree's Friend if Done Properly

Why Mulch?

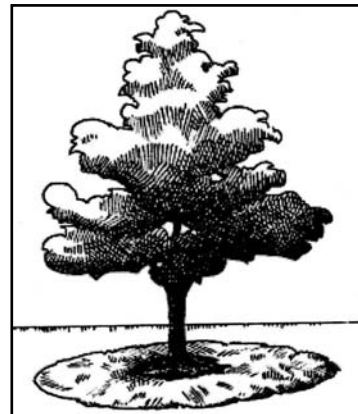
Mulch recreates the organic layer and soil structure of Mother Nature's native habitats, where trees share larger areas of soil that are mulched naturally by a relatively even layer of decomposing leaves that release minerals and nutrients to the soil.

Benefits of Mulch

Mulch conserves moisture so less watering is needed. Using mulch helps maintain soil temperature, keeping it warmer in winter and cooler in summer. Mulch suppresses weeds and protects trunks from lawnmowers and string trimmers. Mulch improves soil structure and drainage and increases fertility as the organic matter decomposes. When applied properly, mulch promotes tree growth and beautifies the landscape.

Do: Doughnut

Mulch should be maintained at a depth of approximately 2" to 4". Mulch should not touch the trunk, so be certain to pull it several inches away. By doing so, you'll create a "doughnut" around the trunk. A general rule is to keep mulch approximately 4" from the trunk for a young tree and around 8" away for a more mature tree. If possible, mulch should be extended to the drip line. When mulch ages, it should be raked to break up matted layers in order to permit air and water to penetrate the soil. Use "working," organic mulches such as shredded leaves or bark, peat moss, or mushroom compost.



Missouri Dept. of Conservation

Don't: Volcano

Avoid creating a mulch “volcano.” When trees are young, this is especially critical as a mulch volcano can create an umbrella that sheds water away from the original root ball. Getting water to those thirsty roots in the first couple of years after planting is vital to ensuring proper growth.

A mulch volcano retains excess moisture, and as a result, promotes bark decay and root rot or produces fungal cankers (open wounds). Diseases grow better in the dark, moist environment created by a mulch volcano. A mulch volcano attracts harmful insects and makes a nice home for rodents that may chew the bark; a loss of bark means less or no movement of sap and nutrients.



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When improperly mulched, trees with shallow roots, such as Maples, may have their feeder roots grow in the mulch which holds much less water than real soil. Or, the roots may grow around the trunk causing “girdling,” which strangles the trunk.

Also, it's best not to use sheet plastic under mulch in an attempt to control weeds. Plastic does not allow water to penetrate into the root zone and may slow oxygen exchange to the roots.