

TO MULCH OR NOT TO MULCH

Why mulch can be both beneficial and harmful to the landscape.

Traditionally ever spring un-educated landscapers and homeowner alike apply richly colored mulch to landscape beds without any rhyme or reason. Thinking they are improving the health of the plants and look of the property, they go about their merry way. Here's the scoop about mulch and why we don't want to act like them.

Organic or Inorganic

Mulching is one of the simplest and most beneficial practices you can do for the protection of your new and existing plants. Organic or inorganic mulches are available with different benefits including protection of soil erosion, aids moisture retention, suppresses weed growth, insulates soil against climatic extremes, reduces compaction of soil from heavy rains, and provides a finished look to the landscape.

Pine straw, leaves, shredded hardwood, and shredded roots are examples of organic mulches which decompose and provides much needed nutrients like Nitrogen to the soil system and produces matter that helps to keep the soil loose. However, watch out for dyed recycled wood mulch. This product is generally ground-up pallets, left-over wood products from job-sites, etc. Rather than aid in plant health, recycled wood mulch steals Nitrogen from the soil in order to decompose.

Inorganic mulches include stone, gravel, and shredded rubber. These mulches are used primarily for their color and longevity without any soil improving qualities. Generally, inorganic mulches have a greater cost per square foot coverage than do organic mulches.

Applying Mulch

On average a 2" to 2½" thick layer of mulch to landscape beds or within the drip line of the tree canopy. Over time landscape beds may need to be extended in order to accommodate growing roots. This thickness and bed extensions allows for the basic principles of mulching (weed control, moisture conservation, and temperature control).

On the other hand mulch applied in a thicker layer may kill the plant by holding water meant for the roots, oxygen deprivation, death of bark, stem & root diseases, prevention of hardening off for winter, vole & other rodent damage to trunk, keeping the root ball too wet, repelling water if the mulch dries out, and most importantly developing of girdling roots. In other words, never pile mulch in a volcano-like manner against the trunk of a tree or exceed 3" in depth.

So, before you apply another layer of inorganic mulch, checking the existing depth of mulch. You may have to remove old non-decomposed mulch before applying a fresh coat!

Now, hopefully you understand it is just not as easy as installing mulch year after year.