

# Winter Mulching Helps Trees Prepare for Growing Season

It's the middle of winter, and there's nothing you can do to care for your trees until spring, right? Wrong. Applying mulch to the soil around trees in winter is a way to give them some "tender loving care" while they endure the Midwest's cold, harsh weather. You can apply mulch any time there is no significant snow cover.

"Think of mulching as giving your trees a blanket to keep them warm," says Larry Hall, vice president of Hendricksen, the Care of Trees. Mulch consists of organic materials such as wood chips, ground up corn cobs or composted leaves. As well as keeping root zones warm in winter (and cool in summer), mulch helps conserve moisture in the root-zone area. It even helps sustain microbes in the soil that help tree roots absorb water and nutrients.

A healthy root system is key to having a healthy tree. There is no question that mulch enhances and aids the root system. While many homeowners prefer to have grass

around their trees, grass roots actually compete with tree roots for water and nutrients. Since most of a tree's roots are in the top 12 to 18 inches of soil, grass roots can be aggressive rivals. Mulch helps give trees the advantage.

Hall suggests spreading a 2- to 4-inch layer of mulch around trees. For small trees (with trunks under 8 inches in diameter), the mulch should begin about 4 inches away from the tree base. This protects the bark from rodents that might otherwise burrow into the mulch and feed on the base of the tree. For larger trees which are not susceptible to such damage, the mulch can begin directly at the base of the tree.

For trees of all sizes, mulch should extend outward in a circle, ideally as far as the branches reach. But while mulch is good for trees, it is harmful to grass. So for those who wish to maintain grass beneath their trees, the mulch should only extend as far as possible without interfering with the lawn.

Some turf may need to be sacrificed, however. If grass is in an area that should be mulched, such as at the base of a large tree, place the mulch directly over the grass. Do not remove the grass, since digging could harm the tree's roots.

When mulching with fresh wood chips, be sure to apply fertilizer over the top of the mulch. This provides nutrients for the microorganisms that will decompose the wood chips. Without fertilizer, the microorganisms will use nutrients from the soil around the tree roots, reducing the nutrients available to the tree – and partially defeating the purpose of the mulch. Use 1 to 2 pounds of actual nitrogen per 1,000 square feet of mulched area.

Mulch is available through a number of sources. Many municipal forestry departments and commercial arborists provide wood chip mulch free of charge. Home and garden centers also sell a variety of mulches.

For a free pamphlet on mulching, call Hendricksen, the Care of Trees at 847-394-4220. ■

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## Wilkinson-Kane Report...

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ease. This staggering figure also points out the importance of both turf diseases and fungicides to the golf industry.

### THE BOTTOM LINE!

Diseases are a major concern to the golf course superintendent, and a tremendous amount of energy and money are spent on these diseases each year. If a single fungicide application costs \$3,000 per course, and if research could reduce the number of fungicide applications by one each year, it would be a savings

of one million dollars. How can this be accomplished? Support research! Currently, the Illinois golf industry donates about \$10,000 for disease research. This means that for every dollar you spend on fungicides, a donation of one-tenth of a penny is currently being made. Golf course superintendents are great supporters of research because they understand how it can advance turf disease management. We all need to think of ways to increase support for research, as more support will mean faster development of better disease management tools. The information from this survey clearly shows that

turf diseases are important, and with more research will come better alternatives for managing them.

**PLEASE REMEMBER THAT WE NEED YOUR INPUT: FILL OUT AND RETURN SURVEY CARDS!**

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