

HYDRAULIC MULCHES: PAPER VS. WOOD

Hydraulic mulching is a growing practice among landscapers, but it has yet to reach its full potential.

by Heide Aungst, managing editor

What used to be somewhat of a novelty in the landscape business has become a common occurrence. In fact, William Jacobsen, president of Conwed Fibers Inc., goes so far as to describe hydraulic mulching as "a renaissance."

It used to be that hydraulic mulching was limited to land reclamation and vast highway projects. But the introduction of smaller hydraulic equipment has brought the technique to golf courses, residences and commercial properties.

Choosing the right equipment is an important step before breaking a company into hydraulic mulching, but choosing the right mulch is just as important.

Many companies manufacture and market hydraulic mulches, but three companies concentrate on the landscape industry. Conwed Fibers and Weyerhaeuser produce wood mulches, while Cellin manufacturers a paper mulch product.

Weyerhaeuser's sales manager, Bill Grunow says that studies show that mulched plots have up to 80 percent more cover than seeded plots. Mulches protect seed against elements such as wind and rain, and insulate the seed by retaining soil moisture.

Buying considerations

When choosing a mulch, one of the first things to look for is the product's content. Weyerhaeuser's Silva-Fiber mulch is made out of 100 percent virgin wood. Grunow says the plant in Tacoma, Wash. manufacturers mulch made from whole small Alder trees. The Minnesota plant produces mulch from Aspen wood.

"Wood species is an important



Hydraulic mulching helps establish a uniform stand of turf.

characteristic because some woods don't absorb water as readily," says Jacobsen. He wouldn't, however, reveal the type of wood used in Conwed's mulch, although it is 100 percent virgin wood.

Cellin's K hydraulic mulch is a wood cellulosic product made from recycled newspapers collected at paper drives or obtained through a broker. "We add three ingredients to make it a good product," says Cellin's Harold Smith. Smith would not name the ingredients.

The biggest question concerning ingredients is whether wood or paper is right for the job. Some highway jobs specify the use of virgin wood fiber mulches. But for companies which

have a choice, both products have advantages and disadvantages.

The biggest advantage of paper mulch is that it is less expensive than wood. "We don't think there's any advantage to raw wood," says Cellin's Al Turner. "The bottom line is that it (paper mulch) grows grass and is less expensive. We're not cutting trees down. What we're doing makes sense."

"On the ground, the paper can form a mache which hardens and tends to curl and ball up," Grunow says. "You tend not to get as even a coverage which results in uneven strands of grass."

The next step in choosing a mulch is to look at fiber length. "The number-one key is fiber length," Grunow says. "The fibers interlock with each other on the ground creating a micro-environment for the seed."

Fiber length is measured by running the product through a screen called a Clark Fiber Classifier. Only certain length fibers will be retained on the screen.

Weyerhaeuser specifies that a minimum of 30 percent of the fibers average .15 inches or longer with 50 percent or more retained on the screen. Conwed and Cellin both label their mulches "long fiber," but don't give a specific lengths.

The third point is whether or not the product contains a tackifier. Use of a hydraulic mulch with a tackifier depends on the size and slope of the area. All three companies manufacture products containing tackifier.

The products differ in slight ways, such as packaging, pricing (depending on regions of the country) and customer service.

"I don't think hydraulic mulching has yet to reach its full potential," Jacobsen says.

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