

Bark mulch: an excellent soil conditioner

Shredded bark mulch is commonplace in the landscape and nursery industries.

When trees are dragged from the woods to the sawmill, they accumulate mud and stones. By using a debarker, this cleans off the debris of the trees without marring the wood that is milled for lumber. This in turn keeps the mill cleaner inside, and extends the life of the saw blades. Bark mulch is then accumulated on the grounds of the mill.

How did bark work itself from lumber mills into our particular industries? Nurseries, always seeking better and more economical ways to grow their plant material, saw a use for bark in potting media. Why? Because it is relatively low in cost and has favorable properties. This idea spread from potting medium to soil conditioner and also for use as a ground cover.

Bark uses have expanded to include soft surfaces under playground equipment, jogging trails, fuel for generators and bedding for animals. The most recent development is composting bark mixed with sewage sludge for use as a soil conditioner, potting medium, and topdressing for flower beds.

From whence it comes

Sawmills located throughout the United States produce lumber from species native to their geographical region. Different types of bark are produced with unique characteristics.

Cypress bark mulch is derived from mills in the Southeast. The cypress tree grows mainly in Florida and Louisiana. Cypress, unusually red in color, is naturally resistant to rot and decay. This product will retain its color for longer than any other species of bark mulches. In many cases the whole tree is ground up and marketed as bark mulch to meet the demands for this product in the landscape industry. Cypress mulch is graded on the amount of wood content in the mulch. The gradings range from A (the best, with the least amount of wood content) to C (this not only includes wood content, but some sawdust).

The northern species of trees similar to cypress is the cedar family. This species grows in Michigan, New York and southern Canada. Its color is not as brilliant as cedar, but is reddish. Since it is also resistant to decay and



Bark mulch, such as this used at Edgell Communications headquarters in Cleveland, Ohio, is an excellent low-maintenance ground cover.

rot, it will last in flower beds for two to three seasons.

Another type of bark mulch available in the industry is pine. Many different species of conifers are used. Pine bark mulch can be very stringy and chunky. Many times it is mar-

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keted in mini-nugget or regular nugget forms. Since this material does not break down as fast as a hardwood material, the nurseries use it as a space filler for container growing.

Most common

The most common and readily available bark mulch is hardwood. Hardwood bark mulch is domestically produced and available in all the eastern and midwestern states. Hardwood bark mulch incorporates many different types of deciduous trees. It is light brown when fresh. Because hardwood bark mulch can also be stringy and chunky, many

mills double-shred it to give a nice uniform size. Processed bark mulch breaks down much faster than the other types of mulch mentioned previously. The decomposition process turns the bark darker in color. This bark is the most popular in the landscape industry. The hardwood bark mulch fines (small pieces of mulch that fall through the screening material) are very useful for potting in container material.

Organic advantage

Bark mulch can be applied any time of the year. Spring is the most common, as flower beds are cleaned up and flowers are planted. One advantage of the bark mulch is that it is free of weed seeds and plant diseases. It is an organic material that decomposes to a humus and soil conditioner. It is safe and non-toxic. Bark mulch which has been spread around plants retains the soil moisture and enhances seed germination along with moderating soil and surface temperatures. This can help in the hot summer and also with frosts in the late fall.

One precaution to keep in mind is that aerobic and anaerobic decomposition occur. Heat is produced along with the possibility of a decrease in the pH. A way to remedy this problem is to let the heat dissipate from the bark. You can also help by watering the bark down and handling it with care around juvenile plants. **LM**