

# Mulch: perfect for beauty in landscapes



If properly used, mulch products can improve the health of surrounding trees and shrubs, plus they are visually pleasing to the eye.

## Beware how mulch you use! Experts says it's not hard to actually over-mulch around trees and shrubs.

■ Mulch is an integral part of most award-winning landscapes—not merely for its practicality, but also for its appearance. In combination with the trees and shrubs around which it's used, mulch provides another way for designers to break up large areas in the landscape.

"Mulching started out as being purely practical," notes Al Rickert, owner of Wholesale Landscape Supply in Bradenton, Fla. "It's now become a part of the aesthetics."

The term "mulch" is defined by Dr. Donald Rakow of Cornell University as "any ground treatment that differs from the substrate (soil beneath), either physically or biologically." Many different types are available (see Table 1).

Rakow says wood chips are the most-often-used mulch. "They can serve a valuable role in the landscape if used properly," he notes.

The phrase "if used properly" is key.

"Piling too much organic mulch can rot the base of the tree and kill it," says Bonnie Lee Appleton of the Virginia Tech Cooperative Extension Service. "Back off! In most cases, we see no reason to exceed

two to three inches. If you need more, put a well around the tree base, keeping the mulch away from the tree.

"The finer the particles of organic material you use, the less you should use," she continues. "Weeds have a field day if you're using mulch over fabrics or polypropylene because it acts as a substrate."

Rickert says the types of mulch available to landscapers and golf course superintendents vary according to region.

"Cypress mulch is very popular from Kansas east because of favorable shipping rates. It dominates the market in the Midwest," he notes. "Pine bark is the old standby in the South, Southeast and Central Atlantic. Pine straw is more regionalized in the Southeast, but that's changing."

Though mulches have numerous benefits (see Table 2), there are disadvantages.

"Most mulches also make a wonderful winter home for mice," says Dr. Bill Fountain of the University of Kentucky. "And when warm spring weather arrives, they awaken with the hunger of a 16-year-old male. The closest food source is often the trunks of young trees."

Fountain says that raking the mulch away from the trunk for six to eight inches will discourage feeding by mice without reducing the mulch's benefits. "Hardware cloth around the trunk is also a very effective barrier to mice and rabbits," he notes.

—Jerry Roche

TABLE 1.  
Selected types of mulch:

- blackplastic/geotextiles/fabric
- cocoa mulch
- cypress mulch
- grass clippings
- gravel
- hardwood bark
- limestone
- marble chips
- natural recycle
- pine bark
- pine straw
- volcanic material

TABLE 2.

### Benefits of mulch:

- ✓ decrease phosphorus levels in plants
- ✓ improve manganese content in trees
- ✓ increase penetration of water into the soil
- ✓ insulate soil from extreme cold in winter
- ✓ keep soil more viable (looser)
- ✓ lower pH
- ✓ reduce chances of chlorosis
- ✓ reduce erosion
- ✓ reduce surface evaporation
- ✓ retard weed growth
- ✓ warm soil and accelerate growth in summer

TABLE 3.  
Mulch rankings:

#### WETTEST:

- 1) herbicide-treated shredded pine bark
- 2) shredded pine bark

#### DRIEST:

- 1) marble
- 2) red "Flower Rock"

#### COOLEST:

- 1) chunk pine bark
- 2) red "Flower Rock" (large)

#### WARMEST:

- 1) red "Mite-T-Lite" (small)
- 2) marble

#### BEST WEED CONTROL:

- 1) marble
- 2) red "Flower Rock"

Source: Bonnie Lee Appleton  
VPI-SU