

# Mulch refresher course

## Mulch applied too high around trees can cause multiple tree problems.

By NANCY STAIRS/ Technical Editor

The benefits and the methods of using mulch have been proclaimed for some time but we are still seeing the extensive misuse or lack of mulch use in the landscape. It is all too common to see landscape trees showing wounds from repeated injury from mowers, a definite stress factor which can make the tree more susceptible to pest and disease organisms.

You can overuse mulch too, in particular, piling of mulch around the trunk of a tree. This practice is far too common and provides no benefit to the trees. With 'volcano mulching' the concerns can be boiled down to the fact that mulch in close contact with the tree trunk holds moisture against the bark. This is an ideal environment for pests and fungi to exist and attack the tree. This is not so different than leaving tree wrap or burlap on the trunk of a young tree. Often, upon removal of these materials you can find various insects, pupae and cankers. Mulch placed directly against a tree trunk can also promote the growth of adventitious roots for some species. This may cause additional stress to the tree if the mulch dries out or is removed.

In some cases, upon closer inspection of one of these trees with 'volcano mulch', you can find that the issue is not the amount of mulch used but instead reflects a tree that has been planted with the root ball almost completely out of the ground. While planting a tree with a raised root ball is suggested for sites with poor drainage, there is nothing in the literature that supports a tree being planted with more than 1/3 of the root ball above ground level.

At planting, the mulch should be placed over the root ball area and extend a little further. Since the tree roots will continue to extend further and further from the tree itself, the mulch can also be extended to provide the small absorbing roots with suitable growing conditions. Naturally, there are limits to how far a mulch ring can reasonably be expanded but for the first few years after planting this should be a consideration.

Mulch is not a one-time deal. As the mulch degrades into the soil, additional mulch can be added to the recommended depths. In some cases, complete removal and replacement of mulch may be appropriate. For trees located in areas where winter conditions require salting of walks and roads the mulch can end up holding a build up of salt. With spring rains the trees are repeatedly treated to doses of salt directly into the root zone. The removal and replacement of mulch early in the spring can help reduce some of that impact. **LM**

*Mulch should be between 2 to 4 inches deep and should not come into contact with the tree trunk.*



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