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News Release

To Mulch or Not to Mulch?

Question: We had a lot of trouble this year with some of our landscape trees and gardens because of the drought. We just can't afford to irrigate, the water bills are just too high, but we also can't afford not to do "something." We love our trees and gardens, so what are our options?

Answer: Hopefully you chose the correct tree and garden plant varieties for our area, which would be the first step for a healthy landscape. The next suggestion I would make is mulch. Some of the benefits of mulch include moisture retention, weed prevention, soil temperature regulation, soil erosion prevention and landscape esthetics. Mulching is an important way to maintain a healthy landscape and create beauty with color and texture; it happens naturally in wooded and herbaceous areas. If you take a walk in the woods you'll notice the leaf litter and other organic materials are covering the earth around trees and underbrush which the trees and shrubs benefit from. We are able to mimic some of those benefits in the residential landscape through organic and inorganic mulch.

- Organic mulch consists of natural materials such as bark, leaves, pine-straw, chips of wood, or clippings of grass or straw. Organic materials decompose over time adding to the soil and attracting insects, slugs, worms and birds which feed on them. Organic mulch will eventually need to be replaced.
- Inorganic mulch consists of materials such as gravel, plastic sheeting, landscape fabrics and artificial bark mulch products (ground rubber tires) and plastic pine needles. Inorganic materials do not decompose over time or attract pests. Some inorganic mulch choices may be pricey. Sounds like a no-brainer right? Well not really, there are pros and cons to both and a lot of the decision will depend on the situation and circumstances. By doing a little research ahead of time you can save a lot of time, frustration and money.



When to Mulch:

Mulch new plantings right after you plant them and water them in. Mulching is important when establishing a new planting, to conserve moisture and to restrict weed competition for water and

nutrients. Mulching will also help to protect the plant trunk or stem from injury due to lawn mowers and weed eaters. For established plants in the landscape the ideal time to mulch is in the early spring as this is the time when the plants are coming out of dormancy and before most weeds have germinated. This is also a good time to replenish organic mulches if needed. Take the time to rake up old mulch and throw it on the compost pile before adding new.

How Deep to Mulch:

Much of this will depend on the type of mulch you use. For example fine-textured pine mulch or shredded leaves in excessive amounts, more than a 2 inch layer, may suffocate plant roots and prevent water from penetrating to the roots. Coarse textured shredded pine mulch or nuggets in a 4 inch layer will allow good air and water circulation. So the rule of thumb is: if the mulch will tend to mat together, such as grass clippings or shredded leaves, you would not place a layer more than 2 inches deep. If the mulch won't mat together a deeper layer, 4 inches, would benefit the planting. One other note to remember: if the mulch particles are large and light as in the case of large pine bark chips, they are also prone to float off in a heavy rain or wind.

How to Apply Mulch:

Make sure the area to be mulched is weed free. Spread a layer of mulch over the planting area making sure the mulch is 2 to 3 inches away from any stem or trunk of woody plants. This practice will prevent decay from wet mulch and help prevent rodent damage (damaging voles love the cover of heavy mulch). Do not apply mulch all the way up to buildings; keep the mulch about 1 foot from the building near the planting bed. Termite treatments are applied to the soil around buildings and the mulch would provide termites' access to the building, avoiding the treated soil area if the mulch is spread directly against the building. New tree plantings should have a mulched area of 3 to 4 feet in diameter. This mulched area should grow as the tree does, for example an established tree should be mulched at least 6 to 12 inches beyond the drip line. ***Never place the mulch up against the trunk of any tree.*** This mulching practice will also cut down on lawn maintenance and help protect the roots of the tree.

Mulching practices in a vegetable garden would be quite different than in the ornamental landscape so please research those practices separately. If you would like more in depth information about the benefits of mulch, types of mulch to use in the landscape and assistance in calculating how much mulch you will need for a specific area please visit our website www.aces.edu; view this link <http://www.aces.edu/pubs/docs/A/ANR-1359/ANR-1359.pdf> (see pages 27-29).

For more about this topic please contact Wendy Ulrich, Lab Technician, at the St. Clair County Extension office at (205) 338-9416 or email ulricwg@aces.edu.