

Mulching Tips – More is not Always Better!

We all seem to assume that if a little is good, a lot must be better. Like with medicine, insecticides, and fertilizers more is not better. The same applies to mulching; more can be more harmful than beneficial.

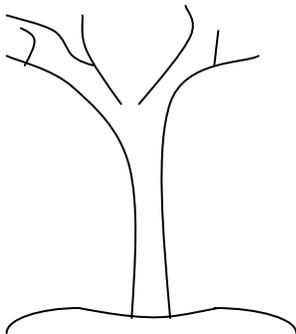
Year after year mulch gets applied to our trees and shrubs, growing deeper and deeper. We want that fresh, clean, look of spring; however; do we think about the effect it may be having on the plants? The practice of mounding mulch up the trunks of trees and shrubs has been discredited by many horticulturists.

The piling of mulch may encourage the growth of fungal diseases, provides cover for rodents and wood-boring insects and may even suffocate certain plants. It also, especially with certain trees, encourages them to put out new roots into the mulch instead of the soil below. This creates problems later. One problem would be you now need even more mulch to cover the new roots. Another would be the plants now will dry out faster in the mulch than they would have if they rooted in the soil. This will lead to the plants requiring more watering in the summer or in dry times. With plants that are surface rooted such as Rhododendron and Azaleas, the extra mulch may decrease oxygen available to the plant. Too much or compacted mulch can prevent water from reaching the roots and/or retain too much moisture hence rooting them.

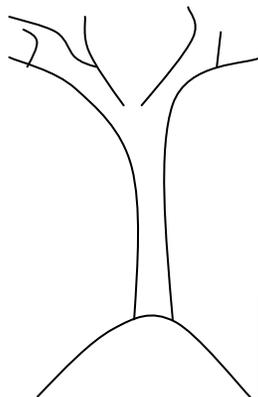
Two or Three inches of mulch are as much as needed to retain moisture and discourage weeds. This amount also allows water and oxygen through easily. Using a pre-emergent weed control under the mulch also helps immensely with the weed issue. The mulch should not come in contact with the trunk of the tree. There should be a four inch ring around the trunk with a coating of mulch only, tapering up to the two or three inches for the rest of the bed.

If you have existing mulch in the beginning of the season, it is best to remove it before applying new. Another option would be to loosen the existing mulch and just apply a light coating of new to dress it up. Whichever you decide it is best not to exceed three inches.

Aged woodchips, mushroom soil, leaves, pine needles and hardwood mulch, are all good materials for mulching. **DO NOT** use fresh wood chip. In order for the chips to age/break down, they will heat the soil around your plants and rob them of moisture and nitrogen.



Correct: 2" of Mulch Tapered



Incorrect: Mulch mounded up trunk