

Mulching Trees Right



Mulch 3-4 inches deep to the tree's dripline. **Photo credit:** Alan Siewert, Ohio Division of Forestry

Trees that grace our yards, parks, and streets require special care just like any other living organism growing outside its natural habitat. It is easy to forget that trees evolved in forests where the soil was loose and rich from centuries of leaf recycling and microorganism activity. Soil moisture and temperature levels were fairly constant in these forests. Tall, straight trees crowded one another in competition for sunlight while protecting each other from wind and other elements. Today we grow trees in a very different, and often hostile, environment....the yard.

Turfgrass poses a challenge for trees because it is much more efficient at absorbing water and nutrients from the soil. Grass will actually rob a tree of necessary sustenance. Thick grass can even constrict young trees, stifling their growth and predisposing them to pests and weather-related stress. Additionally, yard and park trees are often grown in the open where they are forced to withstand the extremes of summer and winter and languish in crushed, damaged soils devoid of organic matter. One way to help trees is to apply mulch around them.

Mulch offers many benefits for tree and landscape plants. Mulch helps conserve soil moisture and balance temperature extremes. It protects

young trees from lawn mowers and weed whips by creating a protection zone around the trunk. Mulch also add valuable organic matter to the soil by building soil structure, improving water infiltration, and providing soil borne nutrients. Mulch is a productive, cost-effective, environmentally sustainable way to utilize much of our yard waste keeping it out of landfills.

What are mulches? Some are simply chopped up wood. Others are mixes of yard waste, composted leaves and kitchen scraps, manures, or sawdusts. There is also green mulch, or living mulches such as ivy, pachysandra, sweet woodruff or other ground covers. Inorganic mulches include lava rocks or gravels.

Mulch should be applied to as much surface area as possible, preferably all the way to the end of the tree's branches (dripline.) This is where tree roots are. Mulch depth is critical. Three to four inches deep is optimum; anything deeper will hinder tree growth and health. Most importantly, mulch should taper toward the trunk so that none is touching the bark. Mulch creates a moist, cool soil environment, which is great for tree roots. However, tree trunks are supposed to be dry. Mulch piled around tree trunks promotes rot, fungi, and other pathogens that damage the tree.

Healthy trees do best in environments that mimic the forest: avoid grass competition, promote organic matter in the soil, and plant trees and shrubs in groups. For more information about tree care in your community, contact...

Mulching Tips

- **Avoid fresh, organic mulch.** The best mulches have composted for at least 3 months.
- **Keep a Mulch-Free Zone around the trunk.**
- **Avoid geotextile fabrics.** They can lead to higher temperatures and are difficult to weed. If you must use them, cut slits to improve porosity.
- **Avoid black plastic and peat moss.** Both repel moisture and do not benefit tree health.