

Mulch Myths

William M. Fountain, Horticulture

Mulch is one of the essentials of good landscaping. It can be used to protect trees, suppress weeds, fertilize plants and retain soil moisture. Like many traditional practices, the use of mulch has some myths attached to it. You can improve the look of your landscape as well as the health of your plants and trees by learning the facts—and discarding the myths—about mulch.

Myth 1: Mulch will attract termites to my house.

Fact: Termites are not attracted to mulch. They may feed on mulch if and only if they are already present. Termites prefer better quality wood such as construction debris buried in the backfill. Pine bark and cypress are the least attractive to termites.

Myth 2: Freshly chipped wood will suck the nitrogen out of the soil.

Fact: Nitrogen does not move up into the mulch, and mulch sitting on the soil surface will not take large amounts of nitrogen from the soil. However, organic matter such as sawdust incorporated into the soil can tie up significant amounts of nitrogen. Over time compost and mulch will release nitrogen and other mineral elements for plant use.

Myth 3: If some mulch is good, more is better.

Fact: Three inches of mulch is all that you need on the soil surface and only two inches if you are using a finely ground mulch. More mulch than this keeps oxygen and water from getting to the plant roots and causes roots to grow up into the mulch.

Myth 4: Piling mulch against the trunk of a tree will protect the trunk.

Fact: Mulch piled against the trunk of a tree will keep the trunk moist, causing the bark to decay. The moist trunk is a more attractive food source for mice, insects and fungi. Keep mulch four (4) inches from the trunk.

Myth 5: You need to add fresh mulch every year.

Fact: You only need to replace mulch if it has completely broken down. The amount of time this breakdown takes varies with the type of mulch. Always check the depth of the mulch on top of the soil before adding more. Remember, three inches maximum! Scratching the surface of the mulch with a cultivator will freshen its appearance.



Mulching is one of the best things that we can do for plants in our landscapes or one of the worst things we can do to them. Proper mulching encourages the development of fine roots enabling the plant to take up more water and mineral elements than is possible under turf. This image shows samples of roots taken from opposite sides of the same white oak. One side was under turf, the other had been mulched for only one year. (image used with permission of G. Watson, Morton Arboretum)



Fresh wood chips should be composted for a minimum of 4 to 6 weeks. This is especially important if the chips are mixed with leaves.



Finely ground mulch lasts a shorter time because it decays more rapidly than coarse mulch. The rapid decomposition results in the mulch becoming hydrophobic (afraid of water). Hydrophobic mulch sheds water keeping it from entering the soil.

Myth 6: Putting landscape fabric under mulch makes your mulch last longer.

Fact: You actually want the mulch to break down and slowly become incorporated into the soil. Decomposed mulch improves drainage in heavy clays and helps retain moisture in sandy soils. The gradual decomposition of mulch is Mother Nature's way of fertilizing plants.

Myth 7: Landscape fabric/weed mats prevent weeds from growing.

Fact: Many weeds (Bermudagrass, nut sedge, nimblewill and others) can poke through landscape fabric. Weed seeds that land on the surface of landscape fabric will root through the fabric and are extremely difficult to pull.



Mulch should be no deeper than 2 or 3 inches and should go out to the dripline of a tree.



Mulching too deep killed this rhododendron.



Piling mulch up against the trunk is called "volcano mulching" and will result in damage to the trunk, development of surface roots and prevents water from getting to the soil.



Surface roots on a red maple resulting from volcano mulching.