

## **Proper Mulching Techniques**

As you look around town, you will find so many opportunities to provide trees, shrubs and flower beds the mulch they desire and need. Although mulching has many benefits, such as helping to reduce soil moisture loss, regulating soil temperature, and minimizing weed germination and growth, there can be a tendency to misuse this beneficial landscaping resource.

Mulch is available in a variety of forms, both organic and inorganic. Inorganic mulch includes pulverized rubber, lava rock, different types of stone, geotextile fabric, and other materials. Inorganic mulch does not decompose and does not need to be replenished often. However, this type of mulch does not improve soil structure in any way, provide necessary nutrients to healthy growth, or add beneficial organic materials. Therefore, most horticulturists and arborists prefer organic mulches over inorganic.

Organic mulch includes wood chips, softwood bark, cocoa hulls, leaves, compost mixes, pine needles, and other products typically derived from plants. These mulches decompose in the landscape at various rates depending on the material, climate and the different microorganisms that are present.

The single, highest complaint related to mulching is a technique in the landscaping industry that is referred to as “volcanic mulch”. This occurs when mulch is piled high against the trunk of a tree. This mulching technique can and does create habitats for rodents that chew the bark and may cause girdling of the tree, or a habitat for insects and disease to hide and wreak havoc on the tree over time. While there is much to gain from mulching, follow these application methods to ensure the proper health of all of your beautiful landscape plants.

### ***Key Application Tips***

- Make certain there is proper soil drainage
- Use the correct mulch for your plant material. For example, some plants (like azaleas) may benefit from slightly acidic mulch such as pine bark
- For well drained sites, apply only 2-4 inch layers; if poorly drained apply less. Coarse mulches can be applied slightly deeper.
- Place mulch out to the edge of a tree’s crown/drip line or beyond
- If mulch is already present, check for depth. If sufficient mulch is present, break up any matted layers with a rake or your hands and apply a bit more to refresh the look

- If mulch is piled against the stems or tree trunks, pull it back several inches to ensure the base is fully exposed
- While not generally a big issue, avoid using a great amount of non-composted wood chips as some of the soil nitrogen may be taken up and used to decompose the wood chips instead of being taken up by the roots for growth

