

INCORRECT MULCHING CAN CAUSE TREE PROBLEMS

Mulching landscape plants, especially those that are newly planted, is often recommended as a way to protect plants from bark damage by lawn mowers, to discourage weeds, to conserve soil moisture, and to protect roots against winter damage. However, there are right and wrong ways, and mulching incorrectly can cause problems.

A correctly mulched tree looks as if a doughnut consisting of 2 - 4 inches of shredded bark or other material has been applied over the roots. The trunk should be in the center of the doughnut, encircled by mulch mounded into a ring, not touching the bark. Rain that hits the mulch will be directed into the root zone. The mulched area keeps lawn mowers and other equipment at a distance, insulates the soil to prevent heaving in the winter, slows the loss of moisture from the soil, and discourages weed growth in the root zone.

In contrast, an improperly mulched tree has a mound of mulch piled up around and up against the trunk itself and across the root zone to a depth of 6 - 8 inches or more. Water that hits this "mulch mountain" tends to flow away from the roots. Because it is piled so deep, the mulch may interfere with the passage of air and water into the soil, and it may hold moisture exactly where you don't want it, around the lower trunk. Rotting bark and invasion by fungal diseases and insects can result. Mulch high up against the trunk also provides places for rodents where they can damage or even girdle trees by gnawing on the bark, undetected, until irreversible damage is done. Fruit trees are particularly appealing to mice, though any young tree and a wide range of shrubs are vulnerable as mulch provides rodents a place to hide from predators as they gnaw away on bark.

The **Master Gardener Hotline** is open from April to October, Monday through Friday. Lines are available 9:00 am to noon and 1:00 pm to 4:00 pm at 888-678-3464

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