



Coastal Plant Care

Nearly everything you need to know about mulch

The benefits of mulch are undeniable. The satisfaction of a weeded, edged, pruned, and freshly mulched garden bed is one of the great joys of being a gardener. Although the benefits are many, there are many misconceptions regarding mulch. In addition, I see countless mistakes made with mulch on a daily basis. In this article we will discuss the pros and cons of mulch and the do's and don'ts of mulch application.

Mulch Benefits:

Outside of the aesthetic benefits, mulch is a wonderful way to improve your soil and overall plant health. As an arborist and horticulturist, I find the vast majority of plant problems can be solved by re-creating environments to which plants are native. In natural settings, leaves, branches, or other organic debris fall to the forest floor and are left in place to decompose and enrich the soil. These native soils are loaded with nutrient rich organic matter and compaction is negligible. In these ideal soils, drainage is improved and temperatures are free from extreme heat and cold. Think of mulch as a way to re-create your plants native environment and to assist with the natural nutrient cycling process. Lastly, mulch has been proven to reduce the instance of root diseases like Phytophthora root rot. For those who have tried to mend a plant with a root disease, you are well aware it's best to avoid these diseases as opposed to battling them. In the research, however, it has been shown the disease abatement benefit of mulch is most significant if the mulch is tilled into the soil. Therefore, consider incorporating some mulch into the soil of your garden bed.

Mulch Types:

Not all mulch is created equal. In general, I recommend using fresh wood chips, shredded hardwood, bark nuggets, pine needles, or composted leaves as your mulch source. There are many dyed mulches on the market today to accommodate the varying visual tastes of the gardening community. I usually avoid these mulches. If necessary, I choose a dyed mulch that is organic and the least harmful to produce. Simply asking your local supplier will reveal which mulch you are most comfortable with.

Leaf compost is known as "Garden Gold" in the gardening community. This is due to the ease with which it is applied, the overall nutrient quality of the mulch, and the fact it can usually be sourced locally. Whenever possible, compost your non-diseased leaves on your property and reuse this compost in your garden beds.

Second in overall desirability is fresh wood chips. Many people do not like the lighter and often non-consistent color of fresh wood chips. This is simply personal preference. Many people think fresh wood chip mulch steals nitrogen from the soil following application. After years of research, this has proven to be false. Other concerns about fresh wood chips are the potential harmful insects and disease in the mulch and that they will attract termites. This is simply not true. With that said, if you have an Ash tree, do not accept mulch that contains Ash as the mulch may contain Emerald Ash Borer larvae. In most cases, tree care companies are happy to deliver their fresh wood chips for free at your property.

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Mulches such as double shredded hardwood are readily available and work great. Pine needles are similar to leaf compost in the sense they can often be collected on your own property and composted prior to use. Any chance you get to reuse your own plant material, take it!

Pine bark nuggets are lowest on my list of desirable mulches. In many cases, Pine bark nuggets can become hydrophobic, a condition that repels water or makes the mulch layer impervious to water. As you can imagine, this would be harmful to the plants growing in a bed desperate for water.

Mulch Application Guidelines:

Mulching can be performed at any time during the year. A 2-4" layer of mulch or composted leaves is highly recommended for all trees and shrubs once annually or every other year. Ideally, mulch should be applied from the base of the plant and extend to the dripline. This may be difficult for larger trees as it will require the elimination of turf. However, please note this would be ideal for the tree. In areas where this is not practical, a 2-4' radius for small trees and 8-12' radius for medium to large trees is acceptable. I do not recommend the use of landscape fabric beneath the mulch. I prefer the mulch to be in direct contact with the soil surface.

Be sure to keep mulch away from the base of trees, shrubs, and other plant material. Mulch applied over the root flare or base of a plant can cause decay of the bark and vascular tissue, increase instances of wood boring insects and disease, and increase the instance of girdling roots which will limit water and nutrient uptake and potentially impact tree stability. Hydrophobic mulch, as discussed with Pine bark nuggets, can happen to any mulch over time. The longer you leave a mulch in place, the higher the risk the mulch becomes matted and resistant to water infiltration. If you mulch every other year, remember to turn your mulch in the off year with a hard rake to assist with decomposition and reduce the instance of matting. If you mulch annually, be sure to rake last year's mulch to ensure good incorporation with the new mulch layer. If you happen to be mulching bare soil for the first time, use a metal landscape rake to scratch the surface of the soil prior applying your mulch layer.

Conclusion:

Mulching is often a large expense for homeowners and property managers. It can be time consuming and back-breaking labor to apply. However, you cannot deny the aesthetic and health benefits mulch provides a landscape. I look forward to the day I never see another mulch volcano around a tree but until then, I will keep fighting the good fight. Happy gardening!

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