



Spread mulch under trees, shrubs, and throughout planting beds to a recommended depth of 3 to 4 inches for medium- to coarse-textured materials. Pull mulch away from the bases of tree and shrub trunks, creating a donut-hole (top image). Do not pile it up against the trunk ("volcano mulching"). Excessive mulch on the trunk causes moisture to build up, creating ideal conditions for insect pests, diseases, and decay (bottom image). Ideally, the mulched area around a tree should extend to the drip line of the branches, or at least cover a 4- to 5-foot diameter area around the trunk. The larger the mulched area, the more beneficial. Check the mulch depth annually and replenish as necessary.

Problems may arise if mulch is used incorrectly. Too much mulch can be harmful. Consider the following points to make an informed choice and avoid problems:

Creates a barrier to oxygen and water. Plastic mulch or weed barriers prevent oxygen and water from penetrating the soil and should not be used unless they are porous.

Excessive moisture. Fine-textured mulch, such as peat moss, grass clippings, and sawdust, holds a lot of moisture and should be used only in mixtures with coarser materials.

Heat injury. Dark-colored mulches absorb heat during the day and lose heat at night as surrounding air temperatures fall. This heat may sometimes injure succulent plant tissue.

Root collar rot. Excessive mulch mounded around the base of a tree can cause decay of the vital tissue at the root collar. Once decayed, serious disease organisms may more readily enter the plant.

Soil temperatures. If applying mulch as winter protection, avoid applying it too early in the fall, since mulch can delay the soil freezing process by retaining heat in the soil. Furthermore, if applied too early in the spring, mulch can inhibit soil warming and delay root growth. As a general rule, wait until after a hard frost in the fall to apply winter mulch and after the last frost in spring to apply summer mulch.

Weed seeds. Some types of organic mulch, including straw, hay, manure, and some leaf-litter mold, may harbor weed seeds and should be composted or otherwise treated before use so that weed seeds are eliminated.

Source: Morton Arboretum
www.mortonarb.org

Correct mulching



Incorrect ("volcano") mulching

