



## Mulching—Part 1

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Mulching is one of the most beneficial things a homeowner can do for the health of a tree. Mulch imitates the natural forest environment. In the forest trees have their roots anchored in a rich, well-aerated soil full of essential nutrients. Leaves and organic materials replenish nutrients and provide an optimal environment for root growth and mineral uptake and blanket the soil. Urban landscapes are a much harsher environment with poor soils, little organic matter and big fluctuations in temperature and moisture. Applying a 2 to 3 inch layer of organic mulch can mimic the more natural environment and improve plant health. Remember if the tree had a say in the matter, its entire root system (which usually extends well beyond the drip line) would be mulched.

The most common benefits of mulching include:

- Helps maintain soil moisture.
- Helps control weeds.
- Serves as nature's insulating blanket.
- Some mulch can improve soil fertility.
- Many types of mulch can improve soil aeration, structure and drainage.
- Reduces the likelihood of damage from weed eaters and lawn mowers.
- Helps inhibit certain plant diseases.
- Gives planting beds a uniform, well cared for look.

When practical, mulch should extend to the drip line – the outermost extension of the canopy - because tree roots can and usually do grow many times that distance. Most of the fine, absorbing roots are located within inches of the soil surface. These roots, which are essential for taking up water and minerals, require oxygen to survive. A thin layer of mulch (2 to 3 inches), applied as broadly as practical, can improve the soil, structure, oxygen levels, temperature and moisture availability where these roots grow.

Organic mulches include wood chips, pine needles, hardwood and softwood bark, leaves, compost mixes and a variety of other products usually derived from plants. Organic mulches decompose in the landscape at different rates depending on the material. Those that decompose faster must be replenished more often. Because the decomposition process improves soil quality and fertility, many arborists and landscape professional consider this a positive characteristic, despite the added maintenance.

Visit [www.plantamillion.org](http://www.plantamillion.org) to learn about a fantastic effort to plant a million or more mostly native trees in central Indiana. The Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCD) in Hoosier Heartland's 10 counties are a part of this project and encourage you to learn more about it. A second purpose of the "Plant a Million" project is to help land owners learn more about managing and caring for the trees they have or plan to plant. Contact the District at to learn how you can obtain a copy of Your Yard, Your Trees – A Homeowners Guide. This full



color book published by the Hoosier Heartland Resource Conservation and Development Council in cooperation with ten central Indiana SWCD's provides extensive information on trees, their selection and care.

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