



Mulching—Part 2

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Mulching is Mother Nature's way of providing winter protection to tree roots and young seedlings. Fall is the time she renews the mulch in the forest with the annual leaf drop. It is a good time for homeowners to do the same. Check the mulch around your trees and shrubs and renew it where needed. It is also a good time to use a rake or fork to loosen or "fluff" the mulch and rough up the surface layer.

As beneficial as mulch is, too much can be harmful. The generally recommended mulching depth is 2 to 4 inches. Many central Indiana landscapes are falling victim to a plague of over mulching. A new term, "mulch volcanoes," has emerged to describe mulch that has been piled up around the base of trees. Problems with improper mulching include:

- Deep mulch can lead to excess moisture in the root zone, which can stress the plant and cause root rot.
- Piling mulch against the trunk or stems of plants can stress stem tissues and may lead to bark rot, insect and disease problems.
- Mulch piled high against the trunks of young trees may create habitat for rodents that chew the bark and girdle the trees.
- Some mulch, especially those containing cut grass, can affect soil pH. Continued use of certain mulches over long periods can lead to micronutrient deficiencies or toxicities.
- Thick blankets of fine mulch can become matted, and may prevent the penetration of water and air.
- Anaerobic "sour" mulch may give off pungent odors and the alcohols and organic acids that build up may be toxic to young plants.

The following are some guidelines to use when applying mulch.

- For well-drained sites, apply a 2 to 3 inch layer.
- If there are drainage problems, a thinner layer should be used.
- DON'T place mulch against the tree trunk. Keep it several inches away.
- Mulch out to the tree's drip line or beyond, if possible. Consider a 4-foot circle as a minimum.
- Organic mulches are usually preferred due to their soil-enhancing properties.
- Organic mulch should be well aerated by occasional raking or other method of "fluffing up".
- Avoid buying or using sour smelling mulch.
- If mulch is already present, check depth before adding more. Use a rake to refresh the appearance.

The County Soil and Water Conservation Districts have joined with the Hoosier Heartland Resource Conservation and Development Council in an exciting project called "Plant a Million". This effort to plant a million or more mostly native trees in central Indiana has a second goal of helping people learn how to manage and care



for the trees they plant or already have on their property. Learn more by going to www.plantamillion.org.

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