



BARTLETT TREE EXPERTS

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Proper Mulching Techniques Key to Healthy Trees

Mulching is one of the most beneficial things a homeowner can do to keep trees healthy - it makes growing situations more "friendly" for trees in general. But over-mulching can be one of the worst landscaping mistakes you can make, causing significant damage to trees and other plants.

The generally recommended mulching depth is 2 to 4 inches, according to the ISA. When applied properly, mulch helps maintain soil moisture, control weeds, improve soil structure, and inhibit certain plant diseases. Mulch also protects plants and trees from "weed whacker" damage and "lawnmower blight" in addition to giving planting beds a uniform, well cared-for look.

But too much mulch - be it layers deep or piled high against tree trunks - can cause major problems for homeowners, including:

- Excess moisture in the root zone, which causes plant stress and root rot;
- Insect and disease problems;
- Micro-nutrient deficiency or toxicity;
- Weed growth
- Smelly planting beds, caused by anaerobic conditions and "sour" mulch;
- Habitat creation for rodents that chew bark and girdle trees.

Why mulch at all?

Urban landscapes are typically harsh environments with poor soil conditions, little organic matter, and big fluctuations in temperature and moisture - all "unfriendly" growing situations for trees. A 2- to 4-inch layer of organic mulch can mimic a more natural environment for trees and improve overall plant health.

When mulching it is important to remember that the root system of a tree is not a mirror image of its top. The roots of most trees extend out a significant distance from the trunk. Also, most of the fine absorbing roots of trees are located within inches of the soil surface.

These shallow roots are essential for taking up water and minerals for trees, and they require oxygen to survive. A thin layer of mulch, applied broadly and practically, can improve the soil structure, oxygen levels, temperature, and moisture availability where these roots grow.

Mulching basics

To ensure the health of your trees and plants, follow these practical mulching tips to landscape, like the pros:

- For well-drained sites, apply a 2- to 4-inch layer of mulch. If drainage problems exist, use a thinner layer.
- If mulch is already present, check the depth. Do not add mulch if there is already a sufficient layer (2 to 4 inches) in place. Instead, rake the old mulch to break up any matted layers and refresh the appearance.
- Avoid placing mulch against the tree trunks.
- If mulch is already piled against the stems or tree trunks, pull it back several inches so that the base of the trunk and the root crown are exposed.
- Mulch out to the tree's drip line or beyond if possible.
- Most commonly available mulches work well in most landscapes. Be mindful of the fact that some plants may benefit from the use of a slightly acidifying mulch such as pine bark.

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Caring for Your Tree

Water

Water is crucial for your tree's survival, particularly during the first year after planting.

- . Water your tree when the soil is dry beneath the mulch apply approximately 10-15 gallons of water once a week from March until the end of October, and as often as twice a week during hot and dry weather.
- . Trickle water onto the soil surface using a hose, or allow water to seep from a bucket with small holes in the bottom.

Weed and Clean

Weeds and trash can prevent water from reaching your tree's roots, and cause a decline in your tree's health. Substances like motor oil, de-icing salt, detergent, and urine can kill your tree.

- . Weed and clean the area around your tree periodically and prevent toxic substances like dog pee, leaking garbage, car oil or de-icing salt from entering the soil.

Protect

Tree roots require water and air for survival. Compacted soil and cemented pits prevent water and air from reaching tree roots.

- . Avoid compacting the soil by piling trash, walking, or driving around the tree's roots.
 - . Never cement over the surface of your tree pit.
- Bark is necessary for protecting the trunk and maintaining tree health.*
- . Keep car doors, dogs, and bicycles away from the trunk to avoid potential bark wounds.
 - . If you lay dry brick or stone around your tree, keep the material at least 6 inches away from the trunk and check each year to maintain this space (pavers placed too close to the trunk can strangle the bark as the trunk gets wider).

Remove Stakes and Straps

Straps left on your tree for longer than a year may cut into the bark and strangle the tree

- . Remove and discard stakes and straps one year after planting.

Cultivate

Cultivating the soil surface around your tree encourages water and air to enter the soil.

- . Spring is a good time to cultivate the soil around your tree
- . If the soil surface around your tree becomes compacted, loosen the first few inches of soil and break up any large clumps. Avoid damaging any large woody roots.

Mulch

Mulch helps conserve water, control weeds, keeps roots cooler in the summer and warmer in the winter, prevents lawn mower disease and prevents soil compaction.

Maintain a 2-4" layer of mulch around your tree, taking care not to pack it against the trunk. Always remember to weed and cultivate the soil, before mulching. Recommended mulches include: wood chips composted leaves, and pine needles.

Plant Flowers

As flowers wilt in the summer heat, they will remind you to water your tree.

- . Plant flowers such as impatiens, begonias, marigolds, and vinca around your tree.