

Mulching of Trees

A current common mulching practice being used by some landscape contractors and homeowners is to place mulch in a 2' to 3' diameter circle and 8" to 12" deep around newly-planted trees and shrubs. The mulch material is simply piled up around the trunk to form a "volcano." The tree will eventually suffer, incur problems and perish.



Trees that have been "volcano" mulched



How does the volcano mulch practice cause trees that, even though they were healthy when first planted, never truly prosper and exhibit symptoms of severe distress?

1. When drought conditions occur, volcano mulched plants may come under severe stress because many newly developed feeder roots are growing in the mulch material which has considerably less water-holding capacity than real soil. The feeder roots migrate up into the mulch rather than down into deeper soil.
2. Deeper roots in the ball may actually suffocate because of being buried too deep by an extra several inches of mulch.
3. No rain can penetrate a foot-thick layer of mulch, and because the mulch is sloped away from the tree, it runs off. Thick mulch also promotes the growth of mats of fungi that shed water. In effect, the mound functions as an umbrella over the root zone.
4. The volcano mulch provides comfortable and dry winter quarters for bark-nibbling rodents.

Trees in their native habitats rarely have individual mulch rings. Plants tend to share a large common soil volume that is nicely mulched by decomposing leaves that are releasing minerals to the soil. Also, the mulch layer is rarely more than 2" thick and never in the form of a volcano. If you use shredded tree bark instead of leaves, create a circle the width of the canopy to place the mulch and make sure that the shredded bark is at least 4" away from the trunk of the tree.

