

Mulch Masters of Indianapolis

Note to Contestants: Use this brochure to prepare for the Verbal Customer Assistance portion of the National FFA N/L CDE. You will pose as a sales associate for the Mulch Masters company. Copies of this brochure and mulch samples will be provided at each sales station. Your customer (judge) will request assistance from you in the selection and application of a landscape mulch.

Choosing the Right Mulch

There are many types of mulches available, each with its own aesthetic appeal and benefits. Consider options such as hardwood chips, pine bark, landscape stones, and more. While mulch can add a touch of visual interest to your landscape, remember that its primary function is to serve as a protective layer, not steal the spotlight. Mulch color and texture should be chosen carefully to enhance the landscape.

Mulch Placement

A common mistake is creating mulch volcanos, where mulch is piled up against the trunk of the tree. Placing mulch directly against the tree bark creates an environment that promotes decay resulting in poor growth or death. Additionally, the extra damp area of a mulch volcano can attract insects and rodents.

To avoid the hazards of mulch volcanos, create a donut shape around the tree. Pull the mulch back 3 inches from the trunk. Apply an even layer of mulch 2-4 inches deep around the tree. Extend mulch to the drip line.

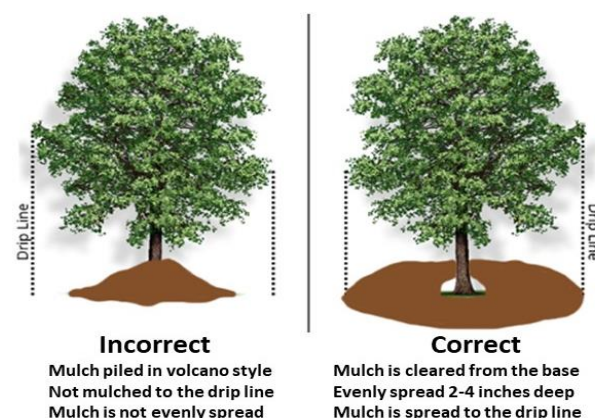


Figure 1 Correct and incorrect placement of mulch around trees.

The Benefits of Mulching

Mulching provides numerous benefits to plants:

- 1) **Weed Control:** The mulch layer acts as a natural weed barrier, minimizing competition from weeds. This helps plants thrive and reduces the need for manual weeding.
- 2) **Moderation in Soil Temperatures:** Mulch acts as an insulator, keeping the soil cooler during summer and warmer in the winter. This creates a favorable environment for root development and overall plant health.
- 3) **Moisture Conservation:** Mulch helps retain soil moisture by reducing evaporation. This is especially important during dry periods, as it ensures your trees receive the water they need for optimal growth.
- 4) **Organic Matter and Nutrient Release:** As mulch gradually breaks down, it releases small amounts of nutrients into the soil and enriches it with organic matter. This contributes to the long-term health of your plants.
- 5) **Prevents Soil Compaction and Erosion:** Mulches help protect the soil structure and helps prevent erosion.
- 6) **Aesthetics:** Mulch, properly applied, can beautify the landscape, providing a pleasing environment.

Application and Maintenance

Mulching may be done any time of year but is commonly applied in spring or fall. Occasionally, a new layer may be needed to cover weather-faded areas and to keep the mulch at the proper depth. The following rate of application is recommended:

Diameter of Mulched Area	Cubic Feet Required (3-4 Inches deep)	Number of Bags (Mulch is sold in 2 cubic foot bags)
4 feet	4	2
5 feet	8	4
6 feet	10	5



Figure 2 Landscape fabric may be used around trees under the mulch.

Landscape Fabrics and Weed Barriers

Landscape fabrics offer good aeration and help reduce weeds. Do not use plastic or poly sheeting. The use of landscape fabric is optional. If landscape fabric is used, it should be placed making sure it is loose around the base of the tree so it does not restrict trunk growth. Place the mulch of choice to cover the fabric.

A Guide to Landscape Mulches

Mulch Masters offers a number of popular landscape mulches. Each product has pros and cons to consider. This bulletin provides an overview of our mulches along with their characteristics.

Organic Mulches:

1) Bark: Pine and cedar bark is available in various sizes. The smaller sizes tend to float in water, so this mulch doesn't stay in place as well as others. As a result, it's not the best mulch for slopes or other areas where heavy rain may wash it away. The larger sizes stay in place better and lasts longer.

Pros: Good weed suppression, moisture retention, long-lasting, attractive appearance.

Cons: May require replenishment due to gradual decomposition. May wash away with heavy rain.

2) Compost: Compost is an organic mulch made from decomposed plant material. It improves soil fertility, structure, and drainage.

Pros: Enhances soil health, adds nutrients, improves water infiltration, and supports beneficial soil organisms.

Cons: May contain weed seeds if not properly composted, needs replenishment over time.

3) Pine Straw: Pine straw is an excellent mulch, especially for acid-loving plants like azaleas and rhododendrons. It is long-lasting and gradually acidifies the soil.

Pros: Good weed suppression, moisture retention, attractive appearance.

Cons: Will require replenishment due to gradual decomposition or loss of color.

4) Wood Chips: Wood chips are a popular mulch made from chipped or shredded wood such as shipping pallets and branches. They break down slowly, enriching the soil over time. It is available in a variety of textures and colors.

Pros: Effective weed suppression, good moisture retention, gradual soil enrichment, and natural appearance.

Cons: If not aged properly, decomposition may deplete soil nitrogen, attract termites or cause fungal issues.

Inorganic Mulches:

1) Gravel/River Rock: Gravel or rock mulch is a durable and low-maintenance option for landscape mulch. It works well in arid regions and complements succulent gardens or xeriscapes.

Pros: Long-lasting, allows for good drainage, fire-resistant, reduces erosion, does not wash away easily.

Cons: Does not improve fertility, becomes hot in direct sunlight, can make weeding difficult, and hard to clean.

2) Rubber Mulch: Shredded rubber from recycled tires is often used as a mulch, and especially on playgrounds.

Note: that the Use of this material has proven questionable for some applications. Customers are advised to consider the pros and cons carefully.

Pros: Durable, long-lasting, weed suppressant, does not attract insects or rodents, and comes in many colors.

Cons: Slow to biodegrade, may release chemicals, does not improve soil quality, rubber mulch is flammable and is difficult to extinguish once ignited.

Frequently Asked Questions: The CDE judge will ask questions. Their questions may or may not be taken from the FAQs.

1. Which mulch lasts the longest? Stone, of course, is the longest-lasting mulch. Rubber mulch lasts a long time as well, while shredded wood products lasts longer than pine straw and compost.

2. How deep should I apply the mulch? Apply mulch about 2-4 inches deep.

3. Is placing landscape fabric under the mulch necessary? Landscape fabric is optional, but it makes controlling weeds easier.

4. Will weeds grow through landscape fabric? Not as long as the fabric has not deteriorated or been damaged. However, if soil accumulates into the mulch, weeds may grow on top of the fabric.

5. Can I use plastic instead of landscape fabric? Plastic or poly sheeting is not recommended due to poor water penetration and restriction of soil air movement. In addition, plastics are non-biodegradable.

6. What if I don't use a mulch, and let grass grow around the tree? Grass and weeds around the tree trunk competes with the tree for water and nutrients, and control of grass and weeds around the trunk is difficult without damage to the tree trunk.

7. What time of the year should I apply mulch? Mulch may be applied any time of the year. Most people apply it in the spring after the soil warms up, during the fall to help provide winter protection, or anytime to replenish or improve faded colors.

8. What color mulch should I buy? That is a matter of personal preference. However, bear in mind that mulch serves many purposes including enhancing the appearance of the landscape, not to stand out as the star of the show.

9. What is a drip line? See the diagram. The drip line is the area directly under the outer most tree branches.

10. What are some of the advantages of using mulch around trees? Mulch helps in controlling weeds, moderating soil temperatures, conserving moisture, adding organic matter and some nutrients, and preventing soil compaction and erosion.