

News Column for Use the Week of May 5, 2025
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Mulching Tips

Now is the time of year when people are thinking about mulching their landscape beds. Mulching is an important gardening practice that offers many benefits to the soil as well as your plants. The most important benefit of mulch is that it helps to conserve moisture and keep the soil cooler during our long, hot summers. Mulch is also great at stopping unwanted weeds in your landscape. A freshly mulched area is the finishing touch, like frosting on a cake. Mulching is pretty easy, but there are a few common mistakes that should be avoided.

When mulching around trees, the most common mistake is applying mulch too close to the trunk. Prolonged exposure of the trunk to the moist mulch results in decay of the bark layer, leading to poor growth or death. When properly applied, mulch should start a few inches away from the trunk and extend at least three feet out from the base. The depth of the mulch layer should be about three inches and no more than four inches. When mulching trees, keep in mind that the mulch pile should look like a doughnut, not a volcano.

When mulching around shrubs, follow the same depth guidelines as trees. When piling mulch around the base of the plant, place mulch a few inches away from the base. Shrubs look best in the landscape when large beds or groupings of plants are all mulched together. Remove any grass between the shrubs or other plants and mulch the grouping as a whole.

When mulching around flowers and vegetables, a three-inch layer is recommended. A finer-textured mulch could be used around flowers. Vegetable gardens are best mulched with materials such as straw, leaves, or grass clippings that will break down by the end of the season and can be incorporated into the soil.

When choosing what kind of mulch to use, that is a personal preference. All mulching materials that are organic, except rocks, provide the same basic function. The difference is in the texture, color, lasting power, and, of course, cost. Trees and shrubs look good mulched with just about any material. Flower gardens look best against a darker color and finer grade of mulch. No matter what type of mulch you choose, it is important to follow these tips, not only for a beautiful landscape but for healthy plants as well. If you have any questions, feel free to stop by or contact me in the Washington office, 785-325-2121 or khatesohl@ksu.edu.