



By Katina Greenly

Aghhh!!! RAIN. It finally came and plants are jumping out of their skins as if from a starting gate. The weeds and lawn grow with an almost audible growl at times like these. The sound of the lawn mowers, string trimmers, and the occasional soprano of a chain saw raise their chorus once again. As gardeners, we're faced with that window of perfect planting conditions that competes with fishing, golfing, bird-watching, softball and baseball, exterior housework and that little voice inside that clamors for sincere hammock or lawn chair use on a sunny 70 degree day.

With weeding at the forefront of regular gardening chores, I spend equal time and effort spreading chipped wood mulch in areas of my beds where the layer has grown thin in spots, and blanketing newly dug beds with a layer 3" thick. Why do I expend this extra money and effort now? Because it saves me hours of weeding and aggravation later and contributes to the overall health and growth of my plants. Here are just a few recommendations for the proper application of mulch.

Mulching benefits

A. Weed Growth Kill weeds in new bed areas before mulching with three inches of shredded or chipped wood mulch. Weed control for the year of application will be exceedingly easy, due to the weed roots growing mostly in the loose mulch layer, and the increased moistness of the soil underneath the mulch.

B. Soil Structure Wood mulches decay over time adding humus to the soil. This is mixed in by earthworms to improve the soil over time. Benefits are increased earthworms and nutrients. Drainage is improved in clay soils, and moisture retention improves in sandy soils. Aeration increases for root health, and long-term soil compaction is eased.

C. Water Flow Mulching decreases rainfall runoff and slows evaporation in hot weather. These effects increase soil water availability to reduce plants' drought stress. Overall health of plants improves and growth

is optimum.

D. Aesthetics Clean cut gently curving lines of mulched beds are pleasing to look at and make mowing much easier than cutting around individual plants in the lawn.

E. Protection Mulched areas around plants protect them from being mowed over when small, and keep trees from being girdled (bark killed around the tree in a strip, which leads to tree weakening and even death) by mowers and string trimmers.

Yes, there are many benefits to mulch use, BUT the right depth of mulch is important. More is not necessarily better. Limit mulch around trees to 3-4 inches. The larger the tree, the larger the diameter of the mulched area. Newly planted and small trees should start with at least a 4' ring; medium trees need a 4-6' area mulched; and large trees might be mulched to their drip line on the soil if the grass is thin and the roots are rising out of the soil. Mulch rings may be planted with a low competing ground cover (myrtle or pachysandra) once the tree is well established. Mulch should not be mounded up against the bark of the tree. Grade the mulch down to the soil level at the trunk.

- Don't over-mulch perennials, especially in poorly drained soils. Crown and root rot may occur in wet winters.

- Don't use mulch right away if a sharp smell comes from the delivered pile. Specify aged mulch if possible. If your mulch smells sour, reduce the height of your pile to 3-4 feet, drench the pile with a garden hose, then let sit 4-8 weeks before applying.

- Pull mulch back from shrubs to apply granular fertilizer, scratch into the soil, then respread.

- If you use landscape fabric, spread just enough mulch to cover the fabric. You don't want to create soil on top of the fabric for weeds to germinate in. It's a real pain to pull weeds rooted into landscape fabric.

Depth recommendation: 4" mulch around trees, 1-3" in perennial beds and with roses, 6-10" under playground equipment. Give an area a try and you be the judge. Happy mulching!

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