



Cornell Cooperative Extension Westchester County

3 West Main Street, Suite 112
Elmsford, NY 10523
Tel: 914-285-4620 / Fax: 914-285-4624
E-mail: westchester@cornell.edu
Web: <http://westchester.cce.cornell.edu/>

VOLCANO MULCHING: A HARMFUL PRACTICE

Mulching has gone mad in many landscapes. There is an epidemic of what Cornell University staff have called "volcano" mulching. This is the tendency to pile up mountains of mulch around tree trunks, in the apparent belief that *if some mulch is good, a lot must be wonderful...* This is most vehemently NOT the case.



We DO recommend mulch. We have said it for years: Mulch retains moisture, block weeds, and prevents bark damage from weed-whackers and lawn mowers. We recommend two to three inches of mulch under trees and shrubs, out to the dripline if possible. However, mulch should not contact the tree bark. If soil or mulch press up against bark, decomposition occurs, diseases set in, and insects penetrate the tissue - sooner or later a fatal combination. (It might help to understand that tree bark and roots are made of different kinds of cells with different jobs.)

The right way to mulch and plant: Keep the mulch a few inches away from the trunk so that the "flare" - where tree roots begin - is exposed. Plant so that the "flare" is above ground-level (grade) to allow for some settling. And, if the mulching has been done wrong, and you can't see the flare: pull back until you do, and - in a new planting - consider lifting and re-planting the tree a bit higher.



Hint: You can tell if a tree is planted too deeply by looking at the line where trunk meets soil. If this is a right angle and the trunk is straight like a telephone pole, the tree was planted too deeply, or soil has been mounded around the trunk. The beautiful, huge, old trees, with a graceful curve down toward their gnarled roots - look like that for a reason: Their planter, maybe Mother Nature, knew just where the trunks and the roots belonged.

Source: "Down With Vesuvius", The Horticulture Outlook, Volume 1, Issue 6, August 1999

Slightly revised by Gerald G. Giordano, Senior Horticulture Consultant/Extension Community Educator, 4/07.
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