

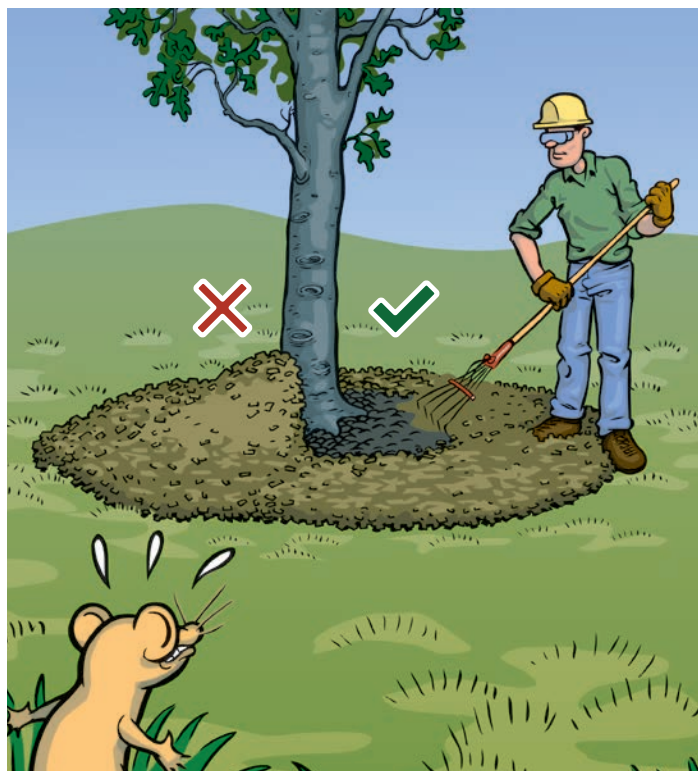
Problems Associated with Improper Mulching

- Applying mulch against the trunk or stems of plants can soften the tissues, making them more susceptible to the development of insects and diseases (see figure top right).
- Mulch against the trunk can also lead to the growth of stem girdling roots. This type of root growth can reduce tree growth or eventually kill the tree.
- Thick blankets of fine mulch can become matted and may reduce the penetration of water and air.
- On wet soils, applying more than 2 inches (5 cm) of organic mulch can reduce soil drying, which can lead to excess moisture in the root zone, which can stress the plant and cause root rot. In these cases, it may be best to leave bare ground exposed or to use a thin layer of inorganic mulch.
- Some mulches, especially those containing fresh grass clippings, can affect soil pH and may eventually lead to nutrient deficiencies or toxic buildups. Anaerobic “sour” mulch may give off pungent odors, and the alcohols and organic acids that build up may be toxic to young plants.

Guidelines for Applying Mulch

The choice of mulch and the application techniques are important to the health of landscape plants. The following are guidelines for applying mulch:

- For well-drained sites, apply a 2–4 inch (5–10 cm) layer of mulch. Fine mulches, such as composed materials, should be applied in a 2–3 inch layer and coarse mulches, such as arborist wood chips, should be applied in a 3–4 inch layer.
- Apply mulch near, but not touching, the trunk and extend to the drip line, if practical. If it is not practical to apply mulch to the drip line, apply as far out as you can. Generally, a 3 foot (1 meter) radius ring is the minimum for most trees.
- If the species you are mulching has symptoms related to a pH problem, select a mulch that can aid in correcting.
- If mulch is already present, check the depth. If sufficient mulch is present, break up any matted layers and refresh the appearance with a rake. Some landscape maintenance companies spray mulch with a water-soluble, vegetable-based dye to add color to faded material.
- If mulch is piled against the stems or tree trunks, pull it back several inches/centimeters so that the base of the trunk is exposed (see figure top right).
- Fresh arborist wood chips, especially those that contain bark and leaves, are an excellent material to apply around trees and large shrubs.



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