

“Too Mulch of a Good Thing”

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We’ve become more inquisitive over the past few years on how the spring mulching phenomenon has gained so much traction. It has become a ritual of spring with trucks and trailers in motion, pitchforks pitching, people pushing wheelbarrow after wheelbarrow in pursuit of covering the ground around us with mulch.

Oddly enough, it wasn’t until mulch became so readily available that we started asking ourselves about what may be happening around us. Once Convenience Stores started carrying mulch as an impulse purchase we began to wonder...has this activity become a peer group expectation or social norm? Don’t get me wrong, I’m a fan of mulch along with the many benefits it provides. Nevertheless, we don’t remember its application being so focused on only the spring season, nor spoken about among neighbors as an expected obligation. Again, mulch plays a role in the overall cultural care programs within our landscapes, but without some questioning and curiosity we can’t simply continue to pile it on without some consequence.

It's not about questioning all the benefits we gain from organic mulch. It is about what we may have lost in using it as an annual, universal, default application- in every situation. There was a time when we let spring unfold and anticipated getting our hands into the thawed, tilled soil. To feel the velvety textures, admire the richness in color, smell the aromas, all while gently sifting the crumbling soil through our fingers. In addition, it seems like we let slip away an assortment of other springtime treasures allowing mulch to be our substitute for the newness of the season. In turn, nature announces spring with a symphonic sequencing of snowdrops, crocus, lenten rose, scilla, pasque flower, prairie smoke & spring ephemerals. The fresh green of ferns unfurling, forget-me nots in flower, all re-introducing us to the arrival of spring and its splendor.



There was also a time when mulch applications took place as summer approached. The idea being that moisture needed to be preserved, soil temperatures, cooled and weeds suppressed. In addition, the plants are in full growth mode and less mulch is needed. A practice at a time of year when we work in cooperation with the summer season to improve growing conditions.

Nature delivers the majority of organic matter (or mulch) to the earth in autumn. When the insulation of such a gift can be put to optimum use. Roots continue to grow below the protective cover, moisture is conserved and the fallen contribution supports the needs of the entire ecosystem. Nature's abundance becomes next spring's seedlings as well as food source. All part of a self-sustaining cycle honoring both the value and beauty of our endings as well as the nurturing and newness of our beginnings. Unfortunately, in our crazy quest for neatness we rake it, load it and haul it away. What if our "clean-up" efforts worked in conjunction with the natural plan. Sharing in the process rather than trying to control it.

With all that in mind, how do we refresh our approach to this spring time mulching mania and offer some ideas worth consideration? Following are some thoughts to consider:

1. Let's say we look forward to the fresh topdressing of mulch that comes with spring. It can still take place, but don't get overly aggressive on depth. In fact, rake the old mulch around a bit. It breaks up the crust and distributes what's in place more evenly. Then lightly top dress for visual improvement knowing that spring is within our grasp. Simply wait and enjoy watching the plants emerge, grow, and the soil to warm.
2. Don't discount the capacity of plants in and of themselves to function as "living mulch". We garden because we love the beauty, pleasure and wonder of plants. We mulch hopefully, because we appreciate the functional benefits mulch provides. By shifting our priorities



towards the plants and their contributions we reconnect with why we garden, not why we mulch. There is one catch- we need to become better students of our plants and their needs.

How they co-exist one with the other, how they collide and mingle. Who they like to “buddy up” with and how they can contribute to the collective success of the plant community. Especially when we are working with perennial plants, most of them prefer not to be heavily mulched. In fact, the annual practice of more mulch each spring is more of a hindrance than a help.

3. The more we learn about our regional plant material, the more we discover how to create designed plant communities that meet nature half way. When they are robust and happy, plants start to fill the gaps where the mulch once was and we offer more biodiversity and interest. Our landscapes and gardens are being asked to offer more collective quality of life benefits than ever before. We need them to assist in the protection of water quality, cool our cities, attract pollinators and butterflies, shelter and feed our birds, improve our air, and be places of protection for our own restoration. It's become a much taller order than simply saying it's time to mulch.



4. Come fall instead of removing all the freely given, fallen organic matter- rake it out of your gardens and mow the leaves into smaller pieces with your mulching blades. Take the chopped up material and put it back as beautiful leaf mulch within your planting beds. That is its



purpose and by mulching it into smaller pieces with your mulching mower blades it will not mat down and can decompose faster towards improving your soil.

5. One of the best uses of mulch is when we take the time to create wonderful tree pits, and top-dress the pit with a uniform layer of mulch. This does a couple of great things for the tree. First it creates a zone of protection to keep string line trimmers and mower blades away from the bark of the tree. In addition, the tree has an area of organic matter that offers all the benefits mulch can provide as previously mentioned. A simple thing, but a very beneficial thing when properly done. One wouldn't think that there are any downsides to doing this. Nevertheless, there is a right way and a wrong way to accomplish the task. Following are a couple examples:



Mulch is to be spread uniformly within the tree pit at a depth of 2”

The mulch needs to be pulled away from the flare of the tree to insure the bark at the base of the tree remains dry

Far too often, the mulch is piled on excessively thick in what appears to be a “volcano like” application. The bark at the flare of the tree remains constantly wet, and the depth of mulch impedes desperately needed oxygen for the roots to thrive. The Tree will appreciate the conscientiousness shown in this practice.



We realize that one of the biggest concerns in garden making is having a sensible approach to the on-going maintenance needs of the garden. In that regard, mulch certainly does reduce an assortment of maintenance inputs, but it doesn't cover all the needs inherent to our own Human Nature. It also is not a substitute for regular observation and review, aka gardening. Over the years, one constant remains steadfast...every garden, needs a gardener in some form. Even natural systems require some degree of management to keep the ecosystem in balance. Design dialogue needs more upfront conversation about the stakeholder's maintenance capacity in alliance with their personal aesthetic. When the two are a match the success rate and satisfaction soar. In the end, Gardens are in all our lives to offer Beautiful Moments, contribute to our Well-Being, Bring Nature Near and Reflect our Values and Desires. Mulch certainly contributes in a supportive role, but dare we say we've gotten a bit carried away.