

Benefits of Mulching Around Your Trees

Urban settings can create harsh conditions for trees, with nearby construction, soil compaction, and lawn management. Proper mulching can relieve some of these impacts and provide the tree with a more natural environment in which to thrive. A 2- to 4-inch layer of organic mulch can recreate aspects of a forest's native soil environment. It is one of the most beneficial practices a homeowner can do for the health of a tree or shrub. A 2-4 inch layer of organic mulch around a tree or shrub can provide a number of important benefits:

- Landscape beauty
- Conserving moisture in the soil
- Improving soil conditions (soil structure, fertility, and aeration as it decomposes)
- Moderating soil temperature, protecting roots from extreme summer and winter temperatures
- Eliminating potential tree damage from mowers and trimmers
- Preventing soil compaction by reducing foot and vehicle traffic, allowing roots to "breathe"
- Impeding growth of weeds and grass that compete with tree roots for water and nutrients

Proper Mulching Practices

While proper mulching can be a great benefit to a tree or shrub, excessive or improperly applied mulch can adversely affect plants. Follow these recommendations to bring the most benefits to your trees:

- Mulch a large area around your tree, preferably to the outermost edge of the tree's canopy or "drip line".
- Apply only 2-to-4-inches of mulch (and less if the soil is poorly drained). If mulch is too thick, oxygen won't get to the tree's roots. Finely textured, double- or triple shredded mulch should only be 1 to 2 inches thick.
- Keep mulch material away from the stem (trunk). The root flare (the base of the trunk where the largest roots begin to curve away) should be visible. Piling mulch against the trunk (aka "volcano mulching") can cause rot, circling roots, and lower oxygen levels for the roots.
- For newly planted trees, mulch more than just the area above the root ball. The goal is to promote root development away from the tree. Roots expand outwards from a tree in a shallow root zone (not deep into the ground). Mulch wide, not deep.
- Before replenishing mulch each season, some old mulch may need to be removed before adding a new layer. Adding new mulch over old in successive years is the same as applying too deep a layer all at once.

Types of Mulch

Arborist Chips

Fresh, natural, undyed wood chips (known as "arborist chips") are the best type of mulch to use. They provide the best combination of weed blocking, oxygen exchange, and endurance. Despite a common myth about "aging" your wood chips, arborist chips can be used as soon as they are created from freshly cut timber. Best of all, arborist chips are free. In most places, and in Avon Lake in particular, you never have to pay a penny for wood chips picked up at Avon Lake's Service Department.

Dyed Commercial Wood Chips

Some people like the aesthetic of black, brown, or red dyed mulches. However, do some research and find out about the source of these wood chips. Sometimes scraps of treated or manufactured lumber products are used which can contain harmful contaminants like binding agents, glue, heavy metals, arsenic, and formaldehyde.

Other Organic Mulches

Other organic materials can be used as mulch, such as pine needles, hardwood and softwood bark, cocoa hulls, shredded leaves, and compost mixes. Just may sure you don't apply to thick.

Inorganic Mulches

Inorganic mulches, such as gravel, stone chips, river rock, and rubber, may be convenient since they don't decompose (and don't need to be reapplied), but they don't provide the soil benefits like organic mulches. In addition, stones and rocks can heat up and damage the tree if they are in contact.

Get Your Mulch for Free!

You should never pay for wood chips. They are plentiful and free. Here are some good sources:

City of Avon Lake

The city provides an endless supply of wood chips, available year-round behind the service garage at 750 Avon Belden Road. These are available to anyone who wants them. The downside: you need to have a way to transport them (pickup truck, bins, buckets). You also get exercise loading them yourself. [More Information](#)

Chip Drop

If you can handle a very large amount of wood chips, you can sign up with Chip Drop and a local tree company will come and dump a truckload in your driveway. These will be the best fresh, natural chips you can get. But, you can't specify the quantity. You have to be willing to take as much as they need to unload, as much as a full truck (about 20 yards). <https://getchipdrop.com/>

Tree Companies Working in Your Neighborhood

If you see some arborists trimming your neighbor's trees, walk over and ask if you can have the chips. In many cases, they would otherwise have to transport them somewhere and pay to unload them.

City of Westlake

Ok, not every option is free. The City of Westlake (in a joint venture with the City of Bay Village), provides their wood chips for a small price (\$7/yard). The advantage is, they dump them into your truck for you. [More Information](#)