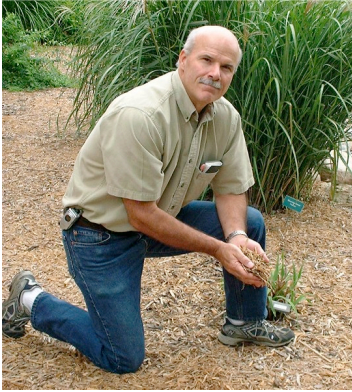


Gardening in the Zone[©]

with Iowa Gardening Magazine's Liz Gilman



Mark Gleason gives us mulching tips.

Mad About Mulch

9/12/05

It may be one person's trash, but another person's treasure. This week I interviewed Mark Gleason, plant pathologist at Iowa State University, about the different types of mulch.

According to Gleason, mulch can be categorized as organic or inorganic. When choosing which mulch to use, consider availability, cost, appearance, function and durability. Inorganic mulches include lava rock, crushed brick, pea gravel, river rock, granite chips and recycled tires. Organic mulches include shredded bark, wood chips, straw, shredded corn stalks, shredded leaves, dry grass, pine needles and even newspapers. Organic mulch will improve the soil as it decomposes over time but that means you'll need to add more layers of mulch on a regular basis. Also, grass and leaves should be composted before using and all organic mulches should be kept away from the stems of plants and walls of buildings.

Gleason recommends mulch for controlling weeds, conserving soil moisture for the root zone, reducing soil erosion, reducing damage from traffic areas and lawn equipment, reducing the severity of some diseases such as blights on tomatoes, keeping plants free of rain-spattered soil, moderating the soil temperature and providing an attractive background for plantings. All of this translates into a healthier tree or shrub with deeper and more extensive roots. Better root growth helps a plant tolerate drought conditions and reduces disease and insect problems. So as you can see, there are many advantages to mulching.

According to Gleason, you should layer mulch to a settled depth of three to four inches under trees and shrubs and the area should be as wide as the plant's canopy. It's also good to build up the mulch like a donut around the trunks versus a slanting cone of mulch that buries the stems and trunks. Your goal should be to use enough mulch to encourage moisture retention. Applying too much mulch though reduces the amount of oxygen available to the roots and can lead to fungus problems.

Fall is a good time to mulch your yards because it's actually like taking a cue from Mother Nature. Leaves fall in the autumn to provide a nurturing blanket of protection around trees and plants.

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