

Less is More in the Mulch World  
By Wendy Scribner, Extension Educator, Forest Resources  
UNH Cooperative Extension

With the arrival of spring this year, you may have had the opportunity to transplant a few trees. Planting even a single tree can be hard work, a labor of love; you want it to be successful. One of the things that can help your trees in their new location is the proper use of mulch. Proper mulching is an important part of establishing new trees in your landscape and maintaining the health of your existing trees. Unfortunately, I see some efforts to mulch trees that are causing more problems for the trees than they are solving.

Recently, I have noticed a lot of trees surrounded by what are called “mulch volcanoes.” Mulch volcanoes are piles of mulch that extend up the trunk of the tree (8 – 12” in some cases) and then taper down toward ground level as they extend away from the tree. This practice is detrimental to tree health, not to mention more expensive than using the appropriate amount of mulch to enhance your tree’s health.

### **Why Proper Mulching is Beneficial to Trees**

Mulching around newly planted and existing trees can be beneficial for a number of reasons. Mulch inhibits the growth of grasses and weeds around the base of the tree, discouraging competition for the nutrients in the surrounding soil, and helping to keep the soil around the tree roots moist.

By controlling weeds and other plant growth near the base of the tree, mulch also protects trees from unnecessary encounters with lawn-mowers and weed whackers. If you look closely, you will see evidence of these types of injuries, which can then allow insects, diseases, and decay organisms to enter otherwise healthy trees.

As your bark mulch begins to break down and decay, it releases nutrients that your trees can then use. Mulch also helps to maintain stable soil temperatures around your trees

### **Why Improper Mulching Creates Problems**

When mulch is applied incorrectly it can cause a number of problems. When mulch is placed right up against the trunk of a tree it holds moisture directly on the tree’s trunk. This constant moisture against the bark can cause decay and can expose the tree to harmful insect and disease agents.

If your mulch layer is too thick it can also allow soil to become waterlogged causing the roots to suffocate.

Over-mulching can also have the opposite effect. Too much mulch can become a barrier to the downward movement of water, essentially shedding it off like an umbrella. This can be a problem for newly transplanted trees whose limited root systems have not yet grown out into the surrounding soil. The majority of their roots are still confined to the

area beneath the mulch pile. If water is redirected away from the mulch pile rather than moving through it the tree may experience drought symptoms.

Too much mulch can encourage young tree roots to grow upward into the mulch layer. Trees are then more susceptible to damage and death during drought conditions because the mulch has less water holding capacity than soil.

Lastly, applying a thick layer of mulch around the base of a tree provides habitat and concealment for rodents which can damage your tree.

Ultimately, too much mulch – rather than supporting your plants growth - puts additional stress on your new plants. **Less is certainly more in the mulch world.**

### **So, How much is Enough? And How Do I Apply it Correctly**

The idea behind mulch is to provide a thin layer of material around the tree. Apply a two to three inch layer of mulch evenly around the tree. Rather than looking like a volcano, your mulch should look like a “donut” around the tree. It should begin about 6” away from the trunk of the tree and extend out to the dripline of the leaf canopy if possible.

Picking the right tree for your particular location, planting it at the right depth in the soil, and applying mulching correctly should help you to create a healthy and attractive landscape.

For more information about transplanting trees, please contact Carroll County UNH Cooperative Extension at 447-3834 or [www.nhwoods.org](http://www.nhwoods.org).

Wendy Scribner is an Extension Educator in Forest Resources with UNH Cooperative Extension in Carroll County. She can be reached at [wendy.scribner@unh.edu](mailto:wendy.scribner@unh.edu) or (603) 447-3834.

UNH Cooperative Extension programs and policies are consistent with pertinent Federal and State laws and regulations on non-discrimination regarding age, color, handicap, national origin, race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, or veteran’s status. University of New Hampshire, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and N.H. Counties cooperating.