

## Are there Volcanoes in Your Landscape?

I suppose the two horticultural topics I harp on the most is the importance of soil sampling and mulching. Particularly in light of the past two very dry summers, I've stressed mulching to conserve moisture.

Mulching helps trees in many ways much the same as it does for shrubbery, bedding plants and vegetable gardens. The use of mulching materials controls weeds, keeps soil moist and moderates very high or low soil temperatures. Around trees, mulch serves to improve tree roots and overall tree health and it serves as a barrier against trunk injury and soil compaction from equipment.

Then there is the case of too much of a good thing. All too often landscapers and gardeners apply a thick layer of mulch in a ring around tree trunks. I've noticed some instances of mulch piled on top of previous years' mulch until it's two or three feet high but not extending out more than a foot or two. This is referred to as a mulch volcano and when several trees are in the yard, it's somewhat strange looking.

I guess tree volcanoes are better than no mulch at all. At least it'll keep the weed-eaters away. While good intentions are made, tree volcanoes can cause health problems for trees.

Mulch volcanoes encourage poor root growth because roots covered by this mulch can die due to lack of oxygen in water-logged soil.

The mulch can also act as an umbrella that sheds water to the surrounding soil. Especially with wood chips, ground wood, bark or sawdust, fungal growth on the mulch can repel water. This is more harmful for newly planted trees that have no roots beyond the root ball.

The biggest problem I believe is that mulch volcanoes keep the bark constantly moist causing the bark to decay. These piles of mulch can also be attractive to wood-boring insects and rodents that may want to feast on your tree.

When mulching trees, as in flower beds, only two to three inches of mulch is needed. To be truly beneficial to larger trees, extend mulch out to the edge of the drip line but pull it away from the trunk.