

Mulching Your Landscape

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When landscaping in the Florida Keys, it is beneficial to place organic mulch material around the base of you trees and shrubs. By using organic mulches, homeowners are mimicking the tropical forest that receives fertilization from natural leaf drop and the decomposing fallen trees.

Organic mulches can help maintain soil moisture, suppress weeds, keep the soil cool, add beauty to the landscape and provide a place for root growth. But not all organic mulches are the same. Some of the criteria for selecting organic landscaping mulch are: sources, availability, price, color, scent, texture, durability, decomposition rates, and susceptibility to termites.

Cypress Mulch is the most popular landscaping mulch bought at home and garden centers, capturing 60% of the market. Cypress mulch is harvested in two manners. The first is as a by-product of the cypress lumber that makes fencing, flooring, furniture, siding, paneling, and other products. The second is by harvesting the whole tree for mulch production only. To maintain Florida's cypress areas, buy only cypress that is a by-product of the lumber industry. Cypress mulch has a pleasant odor, maintains its color, is a slow decomposer, but is eaten by termites.

Pine Bark Mulch is the second most popular at 20%. It is a by-product of the timber industry, produced in a sustainable manner. It is a readily available mulch that retains its color, is a slow decomposer, but is eaten by termites.

Red Mulch makes up 17% of the mulch industry. Red mulch is composed of either mixed hardwoods or recycled wood waste, then dyed a red color to cover the wood impurities. One variety of red mulch is **CCA Mulch** that is created from chipped up wood by-products from demolished buildings, decks, or other construction projects. **CCA** is a wood preservative, Chromated Copper Arsenate, that includes arsenic, a known carcinogen. CCA Mulch has been dyed to cover up the inconsistencies, but not all dyed mulches contain CCA. To determine if the colored mulch you are purchasing does not have CCA treated wood, look for the voluntary label by the Mulch and Soil Council stating certified mulch. For more information about the mulch certification program, log onto the Web site at www.mulchandsoilcouncil.org.

Melaleuca Mulch is made from an invasive exotic tree that overtakes native habitat. By harvesting this tree, it is a win-win situation by providing more habitat for native plants and creating an "enviromulch" that retains color. It is a slow decomposer, but it is not attractive to termites.

Yard Waste is collected from your own property curbside and has been separated for pickup. This helps save tax dollars spent in transporting and waste disposal. This is readily available mulch, but it loses its color quickly, is a fast decomposer, and is eaten by termites.

Free Mulch is available from Waste Management, your local utility company, or local tree trimmers. It is readily available, but it loses its color quickly, is a fast decomposer, and is eaten by termites.

Pearock Mulch is widely used as inorganic mulch and is made of local or mainland rock sources. The Pearock Mulch holds its color, doesn't decompose, and is not attractive to termites. Pearock Mulch is problematic, however, by creating higher than normal temperatures in the landscape, provides no nutrients to landscape plants, and actually inhibits fertilizer uptake.

How much mulch to use?

When applying your landscaping mulch, keep a three to four inch layer around all trees and shrubs. But do not place the mulch up against the trunk. It is best to leave a space of 3 to 4 inches to prevent wood rot by fungal or bacterial pathogens that could enter the overly moist trunk.

Mulching landscape plants is a good practice but it can be deadly to citrus trees. It is recommended not to place organic mulch in the area of the root ball. Mulch holds the moisture in the soil and increases the possibility of root rotting diseases that can slowly kill your citrus tree.

For further reading about mulching your landscapes and different landscaping materials, log onto the following Web site, <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>, and search for these mulching articles:

- ENH 103 Mulches for the Landscape
- ENH 127 Pests Associated with Mulch and Moisture
- FOR 80 Landscape Mulches: What are the choices in Florida?
- FOR 79 Landscaping Mulches: Will Subterranean Termites Consume Them?
- FOR 69 Landscaping Mulches: How Quickly Do They Settle?