

# Mulching technique vital to trees' survival

BY JOSEPH SAPIA • STAFF WRITER • SEPTEMBER 11, 2008

Elaine Manion, the 70-year-old co-president of the Green Thumb Gardening Club in Jackson, does not think of herself as radical.

But, a few years ago, she could not hold back when she pulled into a South Jersey fast-food restaurant. The newly landscaped property had trees with "mulch volcanoes," the smothering cones of mulch around them.

"I just can't stand to see this," thought Manion. "I've got to save those trees." So Manion re-arranged the mulch properly, clearing a radius "hole" around the trunk with a "doughnut" surrounding it.



Diane C. Zahorsky, horticulturist for the Rutgers University Cooperative Extension Office in Freehold Township, scrapes away mulch from this maple on the grounds of Howell Township Middle School North to illustrate improper mulching. Staff photo by Joseph Sapia

Manion's daughter and granddaughters "were afraid I was going to get in trouble (and) made me stop," she said. "Sometimes, you just have to do things." Darn, right! One of the most dangerous places is between a passionate gardener and struggling flora. So it is no surprise gardeners are in an uproar over mulch volcanoes.

Diane C. Zahorsky, horticulturist for the Rutgers University Cooperative Extension Office in Freehold Township, describes them as a "big pet peeve" of hers and a "big pet peeve of the Master Gardeners," a program she oversees in Monmouth County. The Master Gardeners tell Zahorsky, "You've got to do something about this." "They're very upset about it," Zahorsky said. "Volcano mounding, it just doesn't make sense," said Garner "Gary" Pruitt, 46, a third-generation professional gardener who owns Garner Pruitt Landscaping Inc. in Middletown.

For anyone who thinks mulch volcanoes are not news, try a simple Internet search. Popping up on the Google search engine, for example, were immediate apocalyptic references — "Mulch mounds are killing trees," "Mulch volcanoes kill," "Perils of a mulch 'volcano.'" Yes, a solution is simple and less costly — only use enough mulch to create a boundary to prevent damage from lawn-mowers or trimmers. "Organic, shredded material, like bark, is the best," Zahorsky said. "The worst thing to use is any kind of stone. It (stone) absorbs the heat, so it keeps the roots hot, and it doesn't hold in any moisture." Also, think doughnut instead of volcano.

Place the organic mulch in a doughnut shape around the tree, with the hole being 1 to 6 inches in radius, depending on which expert one talks to. "The point of the doughnut is to keep the mulch away from the base, or trunk, of the tree," Zahorsky said. "As long as it's not right up against it." Then, the doughnut part should be only 2 to 4 inches of even height, according to the experts. "It keeps the weeds out (and) moisture in, it keeps the roots moist and cool," Zahorsky said. And Zahorsky added, "There's no mound." The shallow mulching deters fungal growth, such as "shotgun fungus," whose propelled spores cement themselves to houses or cars, and "dog barf fungus," whose colorful name describes its look. On young trees, the doughnut should only extend to the end of the tree's drip line, or as far as its branches extend — perhaps two or three feet, Zahorsky said. "There is no need to add more (mulch) every year," Zahorsky said. If the mulch cakes, preventing water from being absorbed by the ground, the gardener should remove the mulch and replace it or simply stir it, Zahorsky said.

Mike D'Errico, a supervising forester for the New Jersey Forest Service, said mulch volcanoes can be found all over New Jersey. Why? Professionals have various theories — they add a neatness or color to the landscape, more is

better than less, doing it the wrong way sells more mulch or one yard starts a domino effect. "One person does it incorrectly and the whole neighborhood thinks that's the way to mulch," Zahorsky said. "The only ones benefiting (are) the mulch companies." Professionals may mound simply because "they're too lazy to plant the trees" properly by digging a full hole to accommodate the root ball, Pruitt said. Instead, they may dig a partial hole, covering the rest of the root ball with mulch, Pruitt said. "You're, basically, suffocating the tree," Pruitt said.

Maples at the front of Howell Township Middle School North, according to Zahorsky, are planted incorrectly — the root balls sitting high and mulched over, along with the mulch touching the trunk. With these maples, the mulch caused conflicting problems of keeping moisture away from the roots and keeping moisture against the trunk, Zahorsky said. "It's dry under (the mulch)," said Zahorsky, noting a condition on one tree. "After awhile, it forms like a crust layer and the water can't penetrate." At least one maple had a stress crack. With its root ball protruding above the soil, not enough of the root system was in the ground, even though mulch covered the root ball, Zahorsky said. "It has a lot of moisture around the trunk, because of the mulch," Zahorsky said. "You can really tell it's under stress, because the leaves are undersized and scorched." It was unclear who planted these trees, but the Howell Board of Education's buildings and grounds department is responsible for maintaining them. Jeffrey P. Sharp, the buildings and grounds director, agreed the trees were planted and mulched incorrectly. So Sharp said he hoped to turn the mistake into something positive. "I'm taking this as a learning experience," said Sharp, explaining he hoped to educate his staff in the correct way. Professional gardeners and landscapers, also, may not know proper methods. "There's nothing that holds you back from opening your own lawn-cutting services," said D'Errico, noting a person charging for a service does not necessarily provide a good service.

"I'm paying my landscaper, he must know what he's doing," Manion said. More varieties of mulches have been available, Manion said. They come in colorful reds and blacks, for example, D'Errico said. "You have colored mulch and you stack it up high," D'Errico said. "I think people like the look of it." Even though that look may not be best for the tree.

### **How to mulch trees properly:**

The Rutgers University Cooperative Extension has a flier, "Problems with Over-Mulching Trees and Shrubs," available online at [www.njaes.rutgers.edu/pubs](http://www.njaes.rutgers.edu/pubs).