



## The Perils of Volcano Mulching

All too often, mulch is applied in a mound against the trunk of a tree, so it looks like the tree is erupting from the cone of a volcano.

While mulch is good for trees, volcano mulch is not.

Mulch in contact with the bark of the tree can cause problems. The bark needs air and open circulation, particularly at the root collar (where the root system meets the trunk). If the root collar is covered and kept moist, decay and insect problems can develop. You may not even realize that your tree has a problem until you pull the mulch back or the tree dies.



Figure 1: [blogs.scottarboretum.org](http://blogs.scottarboretum.org)

There are many good reasons to apply mulch around a tree. It creates a barrier zone that keeps damaging lawnmowers and string trimmers away from the bark. It insulates the soil and the tree's roots against hot weather, holds in moisture, and, as it decays, provides nutrients to the tree. A ring of mulch is better for the tree than being surrounded by mowed turf, which competes with the root system of the tree.

However, mulch should be applied in a wide, even layer two to three inches thick and should not touch the bark.

When mulching trees:

1. Use organic material such as shredded wood or bark. Look for a mixture of large and smaller pieces. The finer pieces will help to hold in soil moisture while the more coarse material will allow for air circulation.
2. Spread the mulch approximately two to three inches deep in as wide a ring as possible, ideally out to the edge of the drip line (the edge of the tree canopy).
3. Pull the mulch a few inches out from the trunk so it is not in contact with the bark or root collar. If there is old mulch or dirt piled up above the root collar, gently pull this material back too.

4. When watering, be sure the water flows down through the mulch layer into the soil. This generally requires allowing the water to dribble slowly from the hose into the root zone for a long time, rather than watering by hand. This is particularly important during the hot, dry summer months when all the water from a light sprinkling may be absorbed by the mulch and never reaches the roots.

For more information on tree mulching visit The Morton Arboretum's Tree and Plant Advice website at [mortonarb.org](http://mortonarb.org).