HOME AND GARDEN COLUMN

MELALEUCA MULCH

The cooler weather should be just around the corner, which makes it a great time to replenish the mulch around landscape plants and trees. Mulch is any material that is applied to the soil surface. Organic material, such as wood chips, leaves and pine needles, is the most popular type of mulch used. Not only does mulch add to the beauty of the landscape by giving it a uniform color and texture, it also provides benefits to the soil it covers and to the plants it surrounds.

Mulch helps to prevent water evaporation from the soil, suppresses weeds from growing, and keeps a more uniform soil temperature. It works like an insulator, keeping soils cool during the hot summer months and warm during cold weather. Organic mulches can also improve the soil structure. As the organic material decays, it becomes topsoil and adds nutrients for the landscape plants.

Organic mulches are readily available during the fall months and should be used. Most of the yard waste collected at this time, including leaves, grass clippings and pine needles, can be recycled as on-site mulch. This is a very efficient use of yard waste. It retains the nutrients in the landscape, saves money from purchasing other manufactured mulch, and may reduce tax dollars otherwise spent in transporting and disposing of the yard waste. Organic mulches can be used in combination with each other or alone.

Various types of bark and wood chips are the most popular choice of organic mulch in home landscapes. These mulches provide a nice color to the landscape and are usually long lasting. They are also readily available in bulk from the local home-improvement store or garden centers. There are many choices of bark and wood chips to choose from, including pine bark, pine nuggets cypress chips, eucalyptus chips, and melaleuca mulch.

Melaleuca mulch is a unique type of mulch that needs more exploration. Derived from the melaleuca tree (*Melaleuca quinquenervia*), that originated from Australia, it was introduced into south Florida as a windbreak, soil stabilizer, and landscape tree. Because of its ease to regenerate naturally, it has invaded south Florida's wetland ecosystems replacing native wetland plants.

Finding a way to control this invasive species was vital. One recent control method developed was to harvest the melaleuca trees for landscape mulch. Whole trees (bark and wood) are harvested, chipped or shredded, composted (or heated) to kill seeds, and the mulch is bagged or sold in bulk. Finally, there was success in taking an obnoxious plant from the wild and turning it into a beneficial product for our landscapes.

Not only does using melaleuca mulch in the landscape help control the invasive species in the wetlands, it also helps control termites. According to University of Florida research, termites were the least attracted to the melaleuca mulch than the other mulches in their laboratory tests. It was also the least of the organic mulches to settle (diminish) over a 2-year period, shown in similar tests.

The only problem with melaleuca mulch is that it is not readily available in Central Florida. That was, at least, until now. The Osceola County Master Gardeners are now the only distributors of melaleuca mulch in Central Florida. They will be selling the mulch in bags at their fall plant sale.

The plant sale will be held on Friday, October 5th from 9am to 6pm and on Saturday, October 6th from 9am to 3pm at the KVLS Building in Osceola Heritage Park. Old garden roses, fancy hibiscus, herbs, annuals, bromeliads, and other unique plants will also be available for purchase. Funds raised at the
plant sale support the Master Gardener Horticultural scholarship and other Master Gardener programs in Osceola County.

For more information on mulches or on the plant sale, contact the Osceola County Extension Service. Master Gardeners are available to take your calls Monday through Friday from 10am to 2pm at (321) 697-3000.

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