

Black Mulch

By: Melinda Sperl

Black mulch gained popularity when the trees from Hurricane Katrina that were infested with Formosa termites were chipped and tried to be imported as mulch. People from our area knew better than to take them so they started to burn the wood and sell it as Black Mulch. Now, Black Mulch is a way of disposing of treating lumber, yard debris and weeds. The wood is chipped and burned or the reverse. Very few soil yards actually dye their Black Mulch and if they do it is generally sold at a higher price. Also, Red Mulch is just dyed construction debris.

While you may like the color, over time this type of mulch can have some undesirable effects causing long-term problems for your plants such as non-blooming plants, diseases, and susceptibility to insects. This is all because the plants are stressed.

Chemicals can leach off the chipped wood that was originally treated lumber. Your children and pets are around this wood and playing in it. My own experience was my puppy carrying a piece of mulch, which I found was an old railroad tie coated in Creosote. This is what a builder in my neighborhood was putting in their customer's yard! That poison is now allowed be chipped and resold as mulch to unsuspecting customers.

As for burnt wood - what lives in a burnt forest? Nothing! We know homeowners that have called us for consultations that have used black mulch for years. Depending on the house, we have various complaints of insects, no blooms, disease, etc. When we put a shovel in the ground we find several inches of soot. Plants will not live in ashes and this will take many years to break down into anything that the plant can use for nutrients. Remember, one of the main uses for mulch is for the nutrients. Fertilizer will not replace the damage that this does to your plants.

Because of the nature of the Black Mulch, the ash in this mulch can change the pH of the soil and limit nutrient uptake. Many plants are sensitive to changes in pH and if you are having problems with your plants, it might be worth getting a soil test on your yard before you try to correct any problems. Adding a fertilizer may actually make the problem worse.

Really good hardwood mulch will be dark brown and look very nice for a long period of time and will be free of weeds. Mulch is added so that it breaks down and will actually fertilize the plants as it decomposes. The decomposing process is also home for various microorganisms that are necessary for a healthy garden. These are hard for us to replace synthetically so starting with a natural product is something that is absolutely necessary.

Mulch is also the best choice for weed control in your flowerbeds.

Happy Gardening!

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