

Make your trees "mulch" healthier

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What's the most damaging problem on trees and shrubs in Iowa?

It's not anthracnose, mower blight, or spider mites. The answer is environmental stress. Nothing else even comes close. At least three-fourths of the woody-plant problems we see in the Plant Disease Clinic at Iowa State University result directly or indirectly from environmental stress.

Why is environmental stress such a big problem in Iowa?

Some people think that "Iowa" is a Native American word that means "weird weather". But the last few years have been especially extreme, notably the severe drought of 1988-89. Prolonged dryness weakened millions of woody plants. Many won't recover fully for five to ten years, even if the drought stays away. Many others are dying or dead.

A more basic reason for environmental stress problems is that few of our trees are native to most of Iowa. Home base for most of them is a forest. Their roots still need the things a forest provides, such as cool

2. They insulate. Organic mulches hold down temperature extremes. Cooler topsoil temperatures in summer mean better root growth and less root injury. Warmer temperatures in winter may reduce freeze injury to shallow roots.

3. They keep turfgrass away from your trees. Turfgrasses are vicious competitors for water.

4. They control weeds. A proper depth of mulch will suppress not only turfgrass but also weeds.

5. They keep mowers away from the trunks. Injuries to bark from "mower blight" can be 100 percent avoided. Ditto for a related disorder, "weed-whacker blight".

What organic materials are best for mulch?

The top choices are wood chips or shredded bark. Other very good materials are ground corncobs, soybean straw, leaves, grass clippings, even sawdust.

How much mulch is enough?

The depth of mulch should be three to four inches after it has settled. Depending on the mulch material you use, you may need to apply a layer six or so inches deep at the start. Renew the mulch every few years to keep the three to four inch depth.