

in the garden **BY STEPHEN AND KRISTIN PATEGAS**

Copycat Crimes In The Garden - Mulch

By Stephen and Kristin Pategas

Learning by example is a valid educational tool. But what if the examples are flawed? Mistakes are repeated and over time may even become part of the vernacular. My neighbor does it so it must be right! We've seen numerous mulch miscues that need a good airing.

Many yards exhibit bare soil between the plants with not a bit of mulch in sight. Perhaps it is a holdover of swept yards when settlers kept a vegetation-free zone around the house to keep forest fires and poisonous snakes at bay. However in today's gardens, organic

Shade from the plantings will even help shade out weed seeds.

The use of stone or rubber mulch around plants is sure to fail since organic matter finds its way into crevices, decays, and provides excellent conditions for germination of weed seeds. Eventually this perceived "permanent mulch" is covered by soil and sprouting weeds that are well rooted. These materials make the refurbishing of a landscape bed a huge chore since there isn't any practical way to "clean" the stone or rubber to reuse it. So without a huge colander for rinsing, it's off to the landfill with that pricey investment.

Place a barrier under the mulch and we'll never have weeds. Ha! As mulch decays and breaks down weeds will sprout if it isn't renewed. Weeds will grow right through the fabric and root into the soil below. Making a change in a bed of plants becomes difficult with a layer of fabric lurking underneath.

And what are those mulch cones around trees? Volcano mulch will surely keep a tree trunk moist and encourage decay or disease. Tree roots will grow upward into the deep moist mulch and a girdling root may develop to strangle the trunk. As the trunk is constricted by the circling root, branches may fail and the tree may topple.

Renewable resource is more than a buzz phrase. Select mulches that hail

This is a waste of time and money for blocking weeds.



Install more plants instead of eye-snagging colored mulch.

mulch is needed to keep the weeds out, conserve soil moisture, and moderate soil temperatures. The decaying organics help feed the plants and eliminate most fertilizer needs.

Mulch should be functional and not seen. Why call attention to it by giving it a color? The garden should attract the eye, not the mulch. Provide proper spacing for the plants so as they grow wider they knit together and the mulch disappears from view.

from regenerating trees. Pine bark, pine needles, eucalyptus, melaleuca (bagged as Florimulch), and even the oak leaves falling from on high are all renewable sources. Cypress mulch is not. Cypress trees are clear cut with many wetlands destroyed and are not replanted like the pine trees used for lumber or paper.

A three inch depth of renewable organic mulch is plenty. Keep it three inches away from trunks and out of the crowns of plants. Keep petroleum products like weed barrier and rubber out of the garden. So, set an example for your neighbors and remember that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. ■

Even worse, volcano stone mulch.

Kristin and Stephen Pategas design landscapes and garden at their home and business Hortus Oasis in Winter Park. Contact them at garden@hortusoasis.com or visit www.hortusoasis.com and www.pategaionplants.com. All photography by Stephen G. Pategas/Hortus Oasis

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