

Woof!  
No,



by Carol Ann Harlos

(Sources: *Grower Talks*, March 2016 and Colorado State University Extension Garden Notes)

A great many people are confused regarding using bark as a mulch in their gardens. It's good. It's bad! It provides nutrition for your plants. It eats up nitrogen making it unavailable. What's the story?

If you examine the material used by nurseries in the containers holding the plants you purchase you will note that bark is frequently the major ingredient. This is because bark is cheap, improves drainage, and helps the container stand more erect. But all bark mixes are not created equal.

Bark can be fresh, aged, or composted. It is fresh bark that contains phenolic compounds that may slow down the growth of plants. If fresh bark is added to a mix, its decomposition uses up the nitrogen.

If bark is processed (aged) the phenolic compounds get a chance to break down. This makes nitrogen more available to plants grown in that medium.

How is bark aged? The trees are debarked and removed material is hammer-milled to a particle size deemed appropriate for that bark. The bark is then piled up and allowed to age for up to a year.




If the bark is to be used as an ingredient in compost, the normal protocols for producing compost will be followed.

Another consideration is the type of wood used. Hardwoods (maple, oak, cherry) usually contain toxic substances and break down very quickly. Hardwoods also use a lot of nitrogen to decompose. Bark from softwoods (spruce, cypress, cedar) contain a lesser amount of toxic substances and use less nitrogen to decompose. FYI: pine is the most commonly used tree for mixes.

Wood or bark chip mulches can be used around trees, shrubs, perennials, and small fruits. A wood/bark chip mulch creates an environment for earthworms and soil microorganisms. It reduces soil compaction and the need for supplemental irrigation.

When placed on top of soil wood/bark chips do not tie-up soil nitrogen. However, mixing wood/bark chips into a soil can create a nitrogen deficiency due to a carbon-to-nitrogen imbalance.

The informed gardener can find the right mulch for the right garden or container. Now you know... 



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