

UNL Extension: Acreage Insights

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Wood Mulch and Disease or Critters

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Mulching landscape plants is important to maintaining healthy plants. Yet some homeowners have concerns about mulch carrying diseases or attracting insects.

Most Diseases Not a Concern

As Scotch pine die from pine wilt and other trees die from last year's drought stress, questions about the safety of chipping and using these trees as mulch in the landscape arise.

In most cases, it is fine to chip dead trees and use them for mulch around other trees. For example, this is true of Scotch pine trees that die from pine wilt disease. The wood can be chipped and used for mulch.

However, the wood of trees that die from pine wilt or Dutch elm disease for example, should not be saved for firewood. These diseases are vectored (moved from tree to tree) by beetles. If the wood is stored until next season, the beetles will still emerge and transfer the disease to nearby trees of the same species.

Because the chipping process kills most beetles and wood chips are not a good environment for tree pathogen survival, the risk of diseases being transmitted from wood chips to healthy trees is low and the benefits of using organic mulch outweigh potential risks.

Verticillium Wilt

About the only disease research has shown to be transmitted through mulch is Verticillium wilt. If a tree has died from Verticillium wilt, avoid chipping and using it for wood mulch. Otherwise, the risk of tree pathogens spreading via mulch is limited.

Artillery Fungi

One fungus to be aware of near a home is artillery fungi. While this fungus does not harm plants, it could damage nearby cars and house siding. Organic mulch naturally decomposes to add organic matter to soil. This is one of the benefits of mulch as long as a weed mat is not placed between soil and wood mulch.

Artillery fungi have a role in decomposition of organic mulch. The fungus is so named because it shoots spore masses high into the air. These spore masses stick to surfaces and can appear as small tar-like spots on house siding or cars and are difficult to remove. To prevent this from happening, avoid the use of pure wood mulch and use bark mulch instead.

Termites, Carpenter Ants, and Other Insects

Concerns about wood mulch attracting termites or carpenter ants are common. Termites found in Nebraska are subterranean termites, meaning they nest in soil and not in the wood they feed on. While termites may find and feed on wood mulch, new colonies are unlikely to become established in an area because of wood mulch.

Carpenter ants do not eat wood. They create galleries in moist wood for nesting. Because wood mulch dries out quickly and individual wood pieces are small; it is very unlikely carpenter ants would try to establish a nest in wood mulch.

Some critters, like millipedes and sowbugs, thrive in the cool, moist environment found beneath mulch and they feed on decaying mulch. Just as with logs in the forest, more of these critters can be found beneath mulch but most are not harmful to plants.

If mulch is used near entrances or near basement windows, these unwanted critters might find their way indoors. If this is a concern, keep mulch away from the home's foundation and caulk cracks and crevices to avoid insect entry.

Voles

One critter mulch can attract is voles. At this time of year, too deep of a mulch layer can harbor rodents, like voles, who gnaw on stems and girdle plants. If mulch is piled against tree trunks, pull it back at least a six inches from the trunk.