

MULCH

CSEA
NEW YORK

INFORMATION & RESOURCES ON THE HAZARDS OF USING MULCH

Mulch Fires

Care must be taken to prevent mulch fires.

- Mulch that is piled too deeply, more than a few inches, can build up heat and spontaneously catch fire.
- In many mulch fires, the smoldering mulch tunnels under the surface and then breaks out into open flame.
- Mulch fires start more readily when the weather is hot and it has been dry for an extended time.
- Factors such as below-average rainfall, dry conditions, warm temperatures, and high winds increase the risk of mulch fires.
- Large piles of mulch can spontaneously combust from all the heat they generate, so it is important to be vigilant and employ good housekeeping. The distance between mulch piles keeps a fire from spreading from one pile to another, or to a building.
- Rubber mulch ignites readily when exposed to a propane torch, and once ignited, spreads readily.
- Some organic mulch, such as shredded pine bark, typically ignites only after the mulch has weathered on the ground for six months.¹
- Mulches that are high in oils such as pine bark and shredded cypress bark are easiest to ignite. Dyed mulches that are processed from pallets can also readily catch fire.²

6 CRR-NY 361-4.3 has safety requirements for those who store or manufacture mulch. It limits the size of mulch piles and requires a distance of 10-feet between piles and 25-feet from the property line. It also required mulch piles to be restacked and cooled to prevent temperature above 140° f to prevent fires.

Other Potential Hazards

To avoid fires, mulch beds need to be kept moist, however too much moisture, especially in shaded areas, can cause growth of mushrooms and other fungi.

Mulch can be a great repellent for ticks as they do not like to live in or cross mulch borders. They are also repelled by cedar. However, other pests like ants and spiders may be attracted. Wood or bark mulch should never be used near a building that is infested with termites or cockroaches as they feed on that material and conditions are optimal for breeding.

¹ Journal of Arboriculture ²The Ohio State University Agricultural Technical Institute

TIPS FOR PROPERLY MAINTAINING MULCH

- Use fire-resistant mulches including cocoa shells, pine bark nuggets and shredded hardwood. However, **always read the manufacturer's warning labels as some mulches (such as cocoa shells) are toxic and potentially lethal to pets.**
- Provide a minimum of an 18-inch clearance between landscape mulch beds and combustible building materials, such as wood, vinyl siding, decks, and shrubs.
- Use non-combustible materials like river rock, pea gravel or crushed rock for the first 18 inches around combustible portions of the structure such as the base of a building with combustible siding and around gas and electric meters and grills.
- Maintain proper clearance for electrical devices, such as decorative lights, by following the manufacturer's instructions.
- Provide proper receptacles for smoking materials at all entrances to public buildings and in designated smoking areas. Place them at least 18" away from the building, do not mulch in these areas and remember to regularly empty smoking receptacles.
- Grounds and maintenance crews should be aware when conditions are favorable for mulch fires and increase surveillance of mulch beds.
- Maintain mulch at a depth of no more than two to four inches to eliminate the chance of spontaneous combustion.
- Keep mulch beds moist when possible. Hot, dry mulch beds are more likely to combust.
- Routinely turn or rake the mulch to check for pests or fungi infestations.

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