

Mulches for Conservation and Plantation Plantings

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Whether planting trees is a necessity has dictated that it is something you have to do, it is a chore that many of us will probably go through sometime in our lives. Tree planting can be fun, providing a great sense of accomplishment and warm feelings about doing something to improve our environment. Then comes the hard part: seedling maintenance, especially weed control.

Many people use a combination of cultivation and herbicides to control weeds and other unwanted vegetation in a tree planting. Cultivation is time consuming, especially when you hand-pull vegetation around trees which cannot be reached by machinery. Herbicides can be expensive, and if not applied properly, can damage or kill seedlings. Another method frequently used in forestland settings is scalping a clean area around each tree at planting, in the often vain hope that the weeds will not grow back before the tree is established.

Then there are mulches. Mulching inhibits weed germination and growth and conserves moisture around the tree, which can become critical during drought years. The best results are usually obtained when the mulch is applied to a vegetation free surface. The literature from the manufacturers of mulching products suggests application over existing vegetation, with the prevention of sunlight killing any existing vegetation. We have had variable results with this technique, depending on the weed species.

Many types of mulches are available for use in tree planting and maintenance situations. Sawdust, straw, and bark are popular, readily available, moderately priced, and easy to apply. One disadvantage of organic mulches is they do decompose and need to be

replaced or topped with a new layer every 1 to 3 years, depending on the material used.

Another mulching alternative is man-made landscaping mats or fabrics. The fabric mulches of today are usually made of high tech materials such as polypropylene or polyethylene geotextile fabrics that are treated for protection against ultraviolet degradation, and

anchor the material to the ground. Holes are then marked and cut at desired spacings to plant trees. Some people have found that putting a rock, or some other weighted object, next to the slit is helpful in keeping the fabric from catching the wind and being pulled up. Rolled fabric mulches provide an area of continuous cover to aid in weed control and retain soil moisture. They take less time to install and are easy to maintain these advantages may offset the one disadvantage of rolled fabric mulches: increased cost.

Protecting your tree planting from weed competition can be time consuming and expensive. But when you

go out to your favorite spot and see the new trees coming up under the old, stroll through your high-value hardwood plantation, or sit back and enjoy the benefits of a conservation planting, you will realize that all of your efforts were worth it. It has been said that “We plant trees not for ourselves, but for future generations.”

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