

WG Tech Bulletin - Use Precaution around Tree Trunks

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There seems to be a growing trend of planting around the bases of trees in the landscape. Although this may look good, it is a practice that should not either be done or done with care. Tilling the soil will injure the trunk and root system allowing harmful organisms to enter the tree resulting in a shortened life.

One of the most common practices is planting a ring of flowers several feet wide at the base of trees. The problem arises from the annual tillage of the soil needed to plant the flowers. Every insertion of the spade can possibly nick a tree root or injure the cambium layer, growth layer, of the tree. Once planted the flowers around the tree need to be watered. This constant supply of moisture makes an ideal location for wood rotting fungi to survive and then enter into the tree.

A generous layer of mulch normally accompanies the flower ring. This mulch rests against the tree trunk and bark. The moist, humid soil conditions can make the bark layer of the tree susceptible to rot and decay.

Another common practice around the trunk is to build a planter box. A ring of rocks or wooden timbers often elevates the soil. In some cases I have seen the planter box built up to a depth of about one foot. The construction of this planter is possibly the most dangerous to a tree's long-term survival.

In this scenario not only do you have the problems associated with the planting bed but also the additional soil. Whenever soil is added over the root system, the tree will experience decline. Think of that additional mound of soil as a plastic bag placed over your head. Oxygen is deprived from the roots thus damaging the tree. The larger the area covered with the planting bed the more damage done to the tree.

Besides starving the tree of oxygen the moist soil next to the trunk causes rot and decay. Older trees where the planter has been in place for many years, evidence of this problem can usually be spotted. Digging down along the trunk will reveal areas where the bark has rotted away exposing the hard wood which is highly susceptible to decay. The flow of water and nutrients has also been interrupted.

Be careful when mulching around trees. Mulch is great for young and old trees alike. It cools the soil and keeps lawn mowers from damaging the trunk. The mulch layer should never be allowed to pile up around the base. The same problems result with the excess moisture conditions. Try to keep the mulch layer about two or three inches from the trunk.

Shade gardening under the trees is a popular hobby. It does damage the trees. The damage is often less because it is not right at the base of the tree. The damage is minimized because these shade gardens are usually perennials that do not require annual soil preparation and in most cases less water.

The bottom line is to either proceed with caution or avoid gardening practices that may be damaging to the trees. This damage is subtle in nature but will shorten the life of the tree and lead to more problems in maintaining a healthy, happy tree.

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