

Sticks and Stones

Rocks in a garden can be attractive.

They can form paths or add accents.

But rock mulch around trees? Not so cool.

"This is not Phoenix," said tree expert Pamela Frickmann Sanchez, education program manager for the Sacramento Tree Foundation. "Rocks are not mulch; rocks are rocks."

With conversions of lawns to water-wise landscapes, Northern California neighborhoods are getting pretty rocky. That concerns Sanchez and other experts who are dedicated to maintaining a vibrant urban forest and green spaces.

In trying to cut down on water use, homeowners often replace lawn with cobbles or lava rock, which need no irrigation. That isolates former "lawn trees," surrounding them with barren rock where there once was well-watered turf. Experts suggest a thick layer of mulch around almost any tree to conserve moisture and protect roots. With rocks, it appears the trees are mulched while cutting down on weeds; fulfilling two functions with each stone.

But like concrete or other paving, rocks reflect and absorb heat. During the day, these stone groundcovers can significantly warm the soil while also reflecting heat onto nearby plants. Leaves become sunburned; twigs get toasted. Roots slowly bake.

"Rock definitely increases the (soil) temperature," Sanchez said. "It doesn't insulate the soil or keep it cool. It doesn't do much at all."

Instead of saving water, adding a layer of rocks around plants actually can drive water use up. Hotter soil means stressed (and thirstier) shrubs and trees.

"You have to use more water to keep your plants alive," Sanchez said.

Covering a landscape with black rock is like paving the yard with black asphalt; everything seems hotter. Because it is; the black rock often gets 20 degrees warmer than the surrounding air if exposed to full sun. The effect can be particularly brutal in south- and west-facing gardens.

Shade could mediate that heat effect. But as part of low-water landscapes, trees often are removed.



Wood chips -- not rocks -- make the best mulch for trees,
PHOTO COURTESY OF SACRAMENTO TREE FOUNDATION

"Trees are part of a water-wise landscape," she said. "But so many of the plant suggestions (for drought-tolerant landscapes) are sun loving. Trees make shade. So people start to think, 'I won't have a tree.'"

Landscapers recommend rock or stone because, like a lawn, a leafblower can be used to remove leaves and debris without disturbing the groundcover.

Instead, Sanchez recommends letting the leaves stay pretty much where they fall. That's what nature does.

As for the mulch itself, take another cue from nature: Use chipped wood.

That's the go-to mulch for many tree experts, Sanchez noted. It's heavy enough to stay in place, conserving moisture and cooling roots, while also adding nutrients to the soil. She recommends a layer 6 inches thick (or more) spread like a giant doughnut around the tree, leaving space in the middle next to the trunk. (That helps prevent crown rot.)

Or get cheap wood chips from landscapers or tree cutters.

"I always ask what kind of trees they've been chipping," Sanchez said. "You don't want anything with a lot of seeds; they'll sprout. Personally, I avoid liquidambar."

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