



PHOTO COURTESY OF SACRAMENTO TREE FOUNDATION

A volunteer properly lays down mulch by keeping it about 2-4 inches deep and not exceeding 6 inches.

# Autumn gardening

*Mulching trees and ripening tomatoes during the fall season*

**BONNIE COURTER**  
Master Gardener

**Q**uestion: Knowing fall is a great time to plant trees, how do I go about putting mulch around them to suppress weeds? What kind of mulches are best, and should I put cardboard down first?

**Answer:** You're right to mulch your trees after planting. Mulch not only suppresses weeds but improves the soil structure and provides for good root growth, resulting in good top growth of the tree. It also acts as a buffer from the harm weed-wackers and lawnmowers can inflict on the trunk.

Use organic mulches such as wood chips or compost, applying the compost first, covered by a coarser material. Pine needles are also a good choice. Avoid using landscape fabric beneath the mulch, as this prevents the decomposing mulch from mixing with the soil. Plus, the weeds just grow on top and through

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the fabric, sometimes creating an impervious, moisture-blocking layer. The use of rock or stone as a mulch around trees can produce substantial problems for trees and people. Since rocks retain heat, that can translate into moisture stress for the trees. Rocks can also become embedded in tree roots as they grow and become dangerous missiles when flung out beneath a lawnmower blade.

Mulch should be about 2 to 4 inches deep, not to exceed 6 inches. We've all seen the resulting "volcano" look around planted trees. Too deep of mulch can result in excessive moisture leading to root or crown rot, and it can also impede water and air penetration.

Keep mulch at least 6 inches away from the trunk—you should be able to see both the trunk

and the flare of the tree where it widens out from the trunk down to the soil. This is necessary to discourage bark-chewing rodents like voles.

It is not recommended to use cardboard under the mulch any closer than the drip line of the tree. Many feeder roots of trees are quite close to the surface of the soil, so a layer of cardboard topped by a layer of mulch could block water getting to those roots. Try using a few layers of newspaper under the mulch instead, which decompose more readily than cardboard.

**Question:** Despite all the rain and lower temperatures we've seen lately, my tomato plants are still full of green tomatoes. Is there any way to ripen them at this late stage?

**Answer:** Absolutely! Pick ripe, nearly ripe and mature green tomatoes before the first frost occurs. You can tell a tomato is mature by their size and by their glossy,



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**Ripening bananas placed next to unripe tomatoes releases ethylene gas, which speeds up the ripening process.**

whitish-green fruit color. Often, you can see a whitish "star" on the bottom or blossom end. You can also cut one in half—if the interior is yellowish, and the tissues jelly-like or sticky, it will probably ripen. Discard those fruits that have split or that have disease or insect damage.

Remove stems and gently wash them, allowing the fruit to air-dry. Place the mature green tomatoes in thick straw, or in shallow boxes, one to two layers deep separated by newspaper, or in plastic bags, which are punctured by a few holes for air circulation. Place them in a room, shed or garage where temperature ranges from

55 to 70 degrees. They also may be placed on an indoor shelf out of direct sunlight, or stored in the dark. You can also wrap them in newspaper individually to prevent decay from spreading from fruit to fruit while storing them in a box. To speed up ripening, placing a ripening banana next to them helps release ethylene gas, which stimulates ripening. Check your tomatoes weekly, removing those that show signs of decay and those which are ready to eat. Depending on the storage

temperature, your green tomatoes should ripen over a period of three to four weeks.

Do you have a gardening question? Please e-mail, call or visit the Douglas County Master Gardeners Plant Clinic at [douglasmg@oregonstate.edu](mailto:douglasmg@oregonstate.edu), 541-236-3052 or 1134 S.E. Douglas Ave., Roseburg (1 p.m. to 4 p.m.).

*Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.*