

Dear Monarch,

I can see bare dirt in the landscape! Why can't they put down bark to keep it covered up?

Dear Concerned Resident,

MULCH

That bark is called mulch and it is a wonderful addition to the landscape! Mulch refers to any material added to the soil surface (as opposed to amendment, which is tilled into the soil) and can include plant material like bark or inorganic material like stones/gravel or rubber chips. While mulch has many benefits, we need to be mindful of how and when we apply it.

- Goals are typically weed suppression, preserving moisture and sun protection, soil improvement and plant health, and aesthetics.
- Organic mulches (made from plants) provide nutrients as they break down into the soil, just as leaf litter would naturally contribute to soils in nature. For this reason, mulch is not meant to be permanent and must be replenished periodically. Depending on your environment and budget, there may be times where bare soil is present.
- Selecting mulch is a careful process. Organic material is superior for soil and plant health, but low-quality mulches can carry pathogens and pests and contain weed seeds. Locally sourced mulches are preferable to minimize the introduction of new issues into the landscape.
- Applying too much mulch can be detrimental. Creating a barrier that is too thick will impede water infiltration, damaging plants and the soil microbiome. A heavy mulch layer will not break down properly and will become more difficult to correct than bare soil.
- Mulch can obscure common landscape issues. Covering the soil means soil moisture and irrigation problems are more difficult to assess. We also need to take care to ensure tree trunks have sufficient airflow and visibility for inspection.

MONARCH TIP

Pests and weeds can survive in mulch for weeks or even **months!** Landscapers should err on the side of less frequent, **high-quality** mulch rather than simply keeping soil covered up.