

MULCH CORNER

CEDAR MULCHES

by John Ferguson

Last week we talked about bark mulches available in Houston area and along the Gulf Coast. This week we are going to look at Cedar mulches.

Cedar Mulches:

Many users around the state report that they have had good results with cedar mulches while others report extreme failures and problems. This is because there are a lot of variations in the types of cedar mulch one finds in the garden centers. A couple patterns that have been observed are mulches made from species with the common name of "Junipers" (*Juniperus ashei*, *Juniperus deppeana*, etc.) versus species commonly called "Cedars" such as the Eastern Red Cedar (*Juniperus virginiana*), Southern Red Cedar (*Juniperus silicicola*) and Western Red Cedar (*Thuja plicata*). The first group tends to grow on alkaline calcareous soils while the second group is often found growing on more acidic soils. Most reports of the cedar mulches made from "Junipers" have been positive and most reports of cedar mulches made from "Cedars" have been negative. Juniper mulch is primarily decomposed by fungus species that produce weak organic acids that help make nutrients available in alkaline soils.

The claim to fame for cedar mulch one often hears is that it repels insects. While this is true, it also repels butterflies and beneficial insects. This effect only happens with fresh ground cedar. After a few weeks the oils evaporate or break down and one is left with raw wood that has a very high carbon: nitrogen ratio

that robs nitrogen from your plants. This is why one often sees yellowing on plants when cedar is used as a mulch.

A second issue with using Cedar mulches is the type of processing they have had. This could be fresh ground cedar from land clearing operations to de-oiled cedar flakes from industry. When de-oiled cedar flakes from industry are used they can weigh as little as 190 lbs./cy since they have been cooked at temperatures of 225°F or more to remove the oils and have almost zero moisture when they leave the mill. The low weight is good for bagging, handling and shipping purposes. After cooking the cedar flakes can absorb water after application



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and weigh over 1,600 lbs./cy wet. De-oiled flakes are very low in nutrients and may cause nitrogen deficiencies in the soil and other mineral tie-up problems as it has a very high carbon:nitrogen ratio often over 500:1 (remember healthy soil is only 30:1).

Western Red Cedar (*Thuja plicata*) is very rot resistant. While this characteristic makes it good for lumber, the chemicals such as resins and oils which act as preservatives are not good for plants. These chemicals resist attacks by insects and microorganisms (e.g. fungi) hence also render the wood toxic for soil or composting micro-organisms.

Note: Cedar from younger trees has less of these chemicals than older trees which contain more heartwood and have accumulated more of these compounds.

Note: Reports are showing up that cedar mulch is toxic to chickens and other bird species and should not be used as a bedding material.

Note: One good use for fresh ground cedar mulches is on the floor in greenhouse production. There the oils repel pest insects and reduce the need for pesticides.

Also: After reading Brenda's article above with great interest, John wanted to share he has grown a wild olive tree at his house for 18 plus years and that there is a big one planted at Buchanan's Native Plants. Additionally, at his house the

squirrels have been stripping bark on his bald cypress tree and Lady Banks climbing rose to build nests.

Editor's note: We encourage everyone to share their stories. We love to hear what everyone is doing out there and what they have experienced.