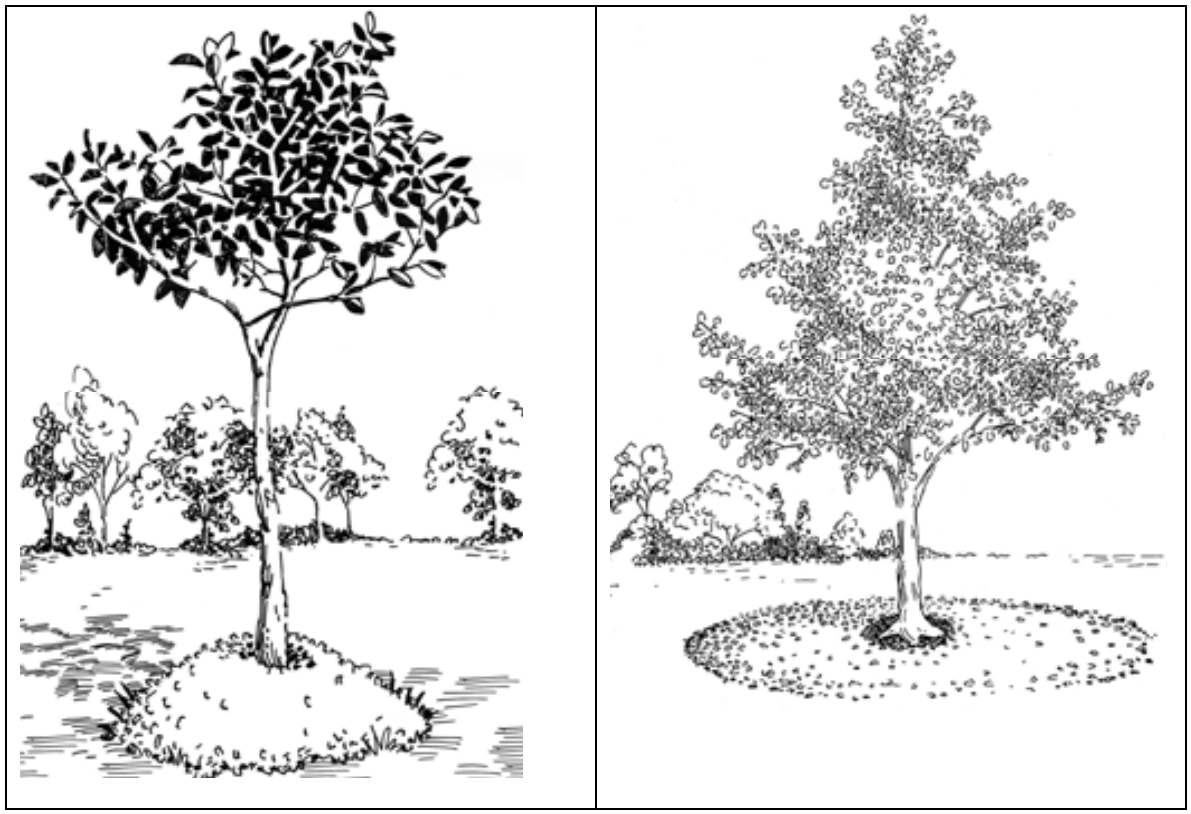
Mature Tree Care

With proper maintenance, mature trees can pay big dividends

Last time we talked about how providing a preventative maintenance program for your mature trees is an investment in the future, because a healthy tree increases in value with age. Along with tree inspection, **mulching** should be part of your mature tree care program. Mulching can reduce environmental stress by providing trees with a stable root environment that is cooler and contains more moisture than the surrounding soil. Mulch can also prevent mechanical damage by keeping machines such as lawnmowers and weedwhips away from the tree's base. Further, mulch reduces competition from surrounding turf and weeds.

An organic mulch layer of two to four inches of loosely packed shredded leaves, pine needles, peat moss or composted wood chips is adequate. Plastic should *not* be used because it interferes with the exchange of gases between the soil and air, which inhibits growth. It is recommended that you mulch as much of the area under the drip line of the tree as possible. When placing mulch, care should be taken to have a mulch-free area one to two inches wide at the base, and not to cover the actual trunk of the tree. Mulch 'volcanoes" can promote moist conditions on the bark of the tree which can lead to trunk decay.



Mulch "volcanoes" can cause problems for trees. Mulch wide not deep.

Fertilization is another important aspect of mature tree care. Urban landscape trees are often growing in soils that do not contain sufficient available nutrients for satisfactory growth and development. If this is the case, it may be necessary to fertilize to improve plant vigor. Mature trees making satisfactory growth may not require fertilization. When considering supplemental fertilizer, it is important to know what nutrients are needed, and when and how they should be applied. When dealing with a mature tree that provides considerable benefit and value to your landscape, it is worth the time and investment to have the soil tested for nutrient content. Most quality garden centers carry soil testing kits, or can arrange to have your soil tested at a soil testing laboratory. With test results in hand, you can determine the appropriate blend of fertilizer to use, and application rates. Many lawn fertilizers contain weed and feed formulations that may be harmful to your trees. When you apply a broadleaf herbicide to your turf, remember that tree roots co-exist with turf roots. The same herbicide that kills broadleaf weeds in your lawn is picked up by

tree roots and can harm or kill your broadleaf trees if applied incorrectly. Understanding the actual size and extent of a tree's root system, before you fertilize, is necessary to determine how much, what type, and where to best apply fertilizer.

This article is the second in a three-part series on mature tree care provided as part of a public educational campaign on trees in the City of Milpitas. For more information on Milpitas City Street Trees, contact the Public Works Department at (408) 586-2600.