

ask the landscape professional

Linda K. Lillie of Sprigs & Twigs

Welcome to my weekly series!

Feel free to send me questions you'd like to have me answer and I will do my best to address the ones of most general interest. **Email or mail your questions to: info@sprigsandtwigs.net or Linda Lillie, Sprigs & Twigs Inc, PO Box 245, Gales Ferry, CT 06335**



Question of the Week: *I know it's early to ask, but every year I worry about using colored mulch, is it safe?*

My short answer is definitely **do not** use dyed mulches. There are too many unknowns to be certain they are OK. No one, including retailers, can be absolutely certain of what chemicals and ingredients are in the dyes, so that is unsettling. The real worry however, is the safety of the wood used in the dyed mulch and the possibility of contamination with toxic substances. The wood source for a majority of dyed mulch is ground-up wood pallets, packing crates, waste wood, wood from demolished buildings and wood diverted from landfills. Some of the recycled waste wood used for making dyed mulch is contaminated with various chemicals, such as creosote and CCA (chromated copper arsenate). CCA contains arsenic as a major ingredient and was used in pressure-treated wood up until 2003. Even though you cannot buy pressure-treated wood with CCA today, it is most certainly still some in the waste stream. Consumers also worry whether the recycled wood was previously painted with lead-based paint or if anything toxic leaked onto the chopped up packing crates and pallets.

Another issue with dyed mulches, according to Ohio State Professor Emeritus Dr. Harry Hoitink, is that dyed mulch is especially deadly when used around young plants or in brand new landscapes because it takes nitrogen right out of the soil, out-competing the nitrogen-needy plants. The wood in these old pallets—chipped up and sprayed with dye—is the worst type for use around plants.

So what do you do? Use natural ground bark mulch that has no dyes. You can easily tell the natural mulches because they have non-uniform coloring, i.e., various shades of brown, and they smell pleasant-like wood. If mulch has one solid, uniform color, has an odd smell or stains your hands, stay away from it.

Sprigs & Twigs

Linda K. Lillie is the President of Sprigs & Twigs, Inc, the premiere landscape tree care & lawn care company in SE Connecticut for the last 17 years. She is a 1995 graduate of Connecticut College in Botany, a Connecticut Master Gardener and a national award winning landscape designer for her design and installation work.

860-235-0752