

A Story of Mighty and Minnie Pine

Pine needles make a beautiful natural mulch that helps to protect and benefit the pine trees.

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“Oh, the autumn of the year is at hand,” rejoiced Mighty Pine. “My old needles are falling. It’s about time, too, because the ground around my feet is getting quite bare. A new cinnamon-brown needle carpet is just what I need. It will cover the weeds now gaining a foothold and competing with me for moisture and nutrients. My roots will be kept warm in winter and cool in summer. Birds will scratch around looking for worms who flourish in my natural mulch. Oh, what a lovely season is the fall!”

Mighty Pine’s happiness reverberates through the crisp autumn day as his needles begin fulfilling their appointed task. Suddenly, his feeling of well-being screeches to a halt. Mr. Homeowner One, intent on making his yard the showplace of the neighborhood, gets busy with his rake. “What is he doing?” Mighty Pine wonders. “Taking my needles away? Piling them at the curb? Where are they going? What’s happening to my beautiful needle carpet?” Mighty Pine trembles and his branches droop in sorrow.

“Oh, my gosh! He’s planting grass at my feet—all the way to my trunk! And what is that machine? A lawn mower? A string trimmer? Oh! Ouch! Now my bark is injured! Now I will surely die. Already I’m feeling ill. Diseases and opportunistic insects are busy investigating my damaged bark!” Mighty Pine suddenly feels less mighty, and his joy in the crisp autumn day turns to grief.

Meanwhile, down the street a few houses away, another scene is taking place. Mr. Homeowner Two knows that the pine needles are valuable. He is raking them into a pile around the trunk of Minnie Pine. Higher and higher the pile becomes. Finally, a volcano-like cone skirts Minnie’s trunk. The homeowner looks around and admires his handiwork.

“Oh, no, what’s this?” wails Minnie Pine. “So much mulch will rot my trunk! Insects and diseases will invade my weakened tissue! Oh, please, Mr. Homeowner Two, spread the needles evenly out to my drip line! Remove them from my trunk! Oh, my days are numbered!”

Minnie Pine knows some things that Mr. Homeowner Two has not learned. She knows that mulch should be placed at a uniform depth, and care should be taken so that none is against the tree trunk. Putting mulch against the trunk may cause disease problems on the living bark at the base of the tree, especially with young trees. A mulch-free area, one to two inches wide at the base of the tree, is sufficient to avoid moist bark conditions and prevent infection.

Mulching large areas around mature trees, out as far as the branch spread or drip line, is also very helpful. Often mulching is the only treatment that will prevent or reverse the health decline so common in mature trees in our harsh urban environments. Mulch improves soil conditions so new root growth is increased along with the overall health of the tree.

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The Good Lord had a very good plan when he created trees. He gave them leaves or needles and all the mechanisms they need to live healthily. We all know the story. Sun shines on the green leaves, photosynthesis takes place, and the tree makes its own food. Leaves drop to the ground to protect the roots. Eventually they break down and become a part of the soil—just the kind preferred by the tree. He had it all figured out.

We, being human, decide to alter His plan. We want a pretty, manicured yard, so we interfere and interrupt the cycle. We rake the leaves. Not to worry. Next spring we'll fertilize the tree when we fertilize the lawn. With chemical fertilizers, of course, possibly even containing weed-killers. Fertilizers that wash into neighboring bodies of water. Those that pollute the groundwater.

These scenes happen hundreds of times throughout the city. Every day untold damage is done by well-meaning homeowners as they manage their landscapes. Not knowing. Not thinking.

After all, what you don't know can't hurt. Can it?

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