

Goodbye grass: mulch ring makes for a healthier tree

By ED HUTCHISON
Special to the Record-Eagle

If a tree could talk, it would probably tell you to get rid of the grass around its trunk—or plant it in the forest instead of somewhere in your yard.

That conversation is not likely to take place but if it did, here's why a tree is happier without having grass around it.

Most of a tree's roots responsible for taking up water, nutrients and oxygen grow in the top 40 inches or so of soil. Of these, the majority is found in the top 12 to 18 inches—or about as deep as two digs with a shovel. This is also the zone occupied by the root system of grass. Even the roots of a mighty oak may have trouble competing with the roots of a lush stand of grass for the nutrients, water and oxygen that both need to stay healthy and grow.

Throw in other hostilities the average tree faces in our yards—compacted soil, whacks from the lawnmower and string trimmer and more—and it's no wonder why trees often suffer when they could just as well thrive and grow to their potential.

In contrast, the forest provides an ideal location because there is seldom competition in the important root zone 12 to 18 inches deep. There may be plenty of competition up top, for room to spread, but the forest floor is typ-

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ically a wonderful place for trees. Leaves and other plant material fall to the ground where they decompose and replenish a biologically rich layer of soil. Not so in turf areas where leaves are raked clean each fall.

The good news for your tree, anyhow is that you can easily create a growing zone similar to that of the forest, and save yourself time in trimming and mulching around the tree. Here's how:

Spread a ring of organic mulch three to four inches deep in a circle around the tree. If the layer is four inches, it will smother the grass underneath. Or, you can do a tidy job by removing the sod and installing heavy-duty plastic edging. The edging will help keep the mulch from wandering—as it tends to—into the grass outside the mulch zone. Keep the mulch six inches away from the trunk. If it is up close and in continual contact with the trunk,

insects and disease are likely to visit.

In a way, the ring mimics the forest floor. The mulch will make it easy for water and oxygen to flow and as it decomposes, it will be adding nutrients to the soil.

It will also keep the soil at a moderate temperature, conserve water and best of all, eliminate the competition the tree endured from the grass roots.

Many types of organic mulch will work. Probably the best is cheap and easy to find—wood chips or shredded bark. Both products are available in bags or bulk, by the yard. Avoid grass clippings as they mat down and cut off the ready flow of water and air to the surface below.

How big to make the ring? Go out at least 12 inches from the trunk. Ideally, the ring will be somewhat in proportion to the size of the tree now, and what you expect it to be in five years. Even a ring that extends out 12 inches will give the tree a nice sized free zone from grass roots.

If you use fresh chips or bark, it's a good idea to throw a couple handfuls of fertilizer on the mulch to give the microbes nutrients to use as they work on the mulch. Otherwise, they'll take nitrogen and other elements from the soil around the tree roots and that would begin to defeat the purpose of the mulch ring. It doesn't take much fertilizer—one tree expert recommends a

rate of one to two pounds of nitrogen to each 1,000 square feet of mulched area.

The tree is not the only thing that benefits. With a mulch ring, you won't have to run a string trimmer or lawn mower near the tree and that will save time and hassle.

Ed Hutchison is a lower Michigan freelance writer.

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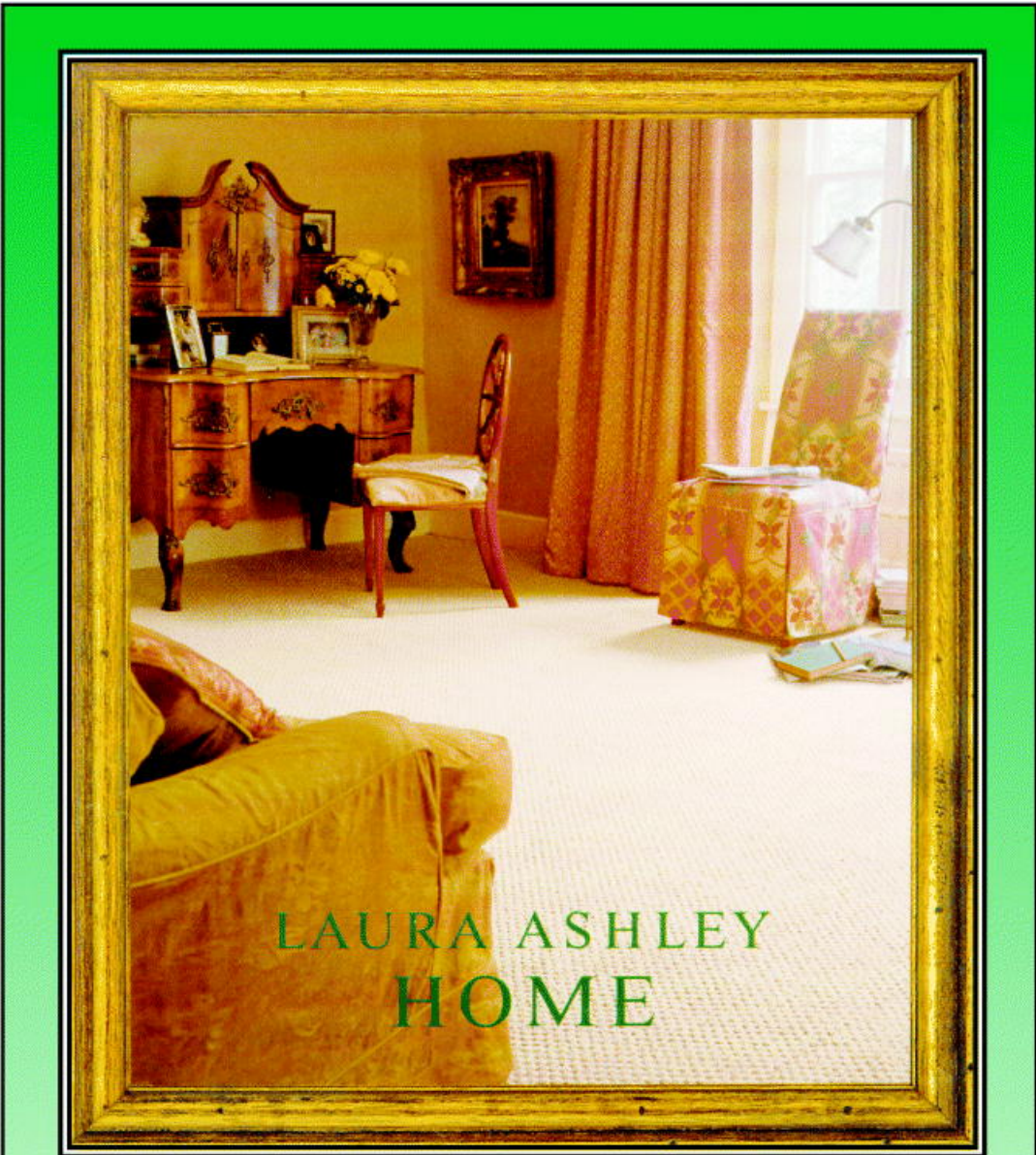
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While a mulch ring can be installed anytime, probably the best time is when the tree is planted as shown here, with Jared Milarch of Traverse City. After the hole is back-filled, a ring of mulch can be spread over the planting hole. Make the ring at least 12 inches from the trunk.



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