Mulch on My Mind
by Monica Tudor

WHAT DO MANY OF THE KERN CNPS members’ beautiful gardens have in common? (Besides native plants, that is...) Hint: it isn’t glamorous, but it can make a significant difference! The often-ignored ingredient in successful native plantings is that lowly material, mulch! It might be gorilla hair (shredded redwood bark), wood chips, leaves, or even rocks or gravel. The key is to select the correct mulch for the type of plants used. (Check out Las Pilitas’ website to see which type of mulch goes with which type of plant.) Mulch shades and insulates the soil from the sun’s blazing heat, traps moisture in the soil, and makes it harder for weeds to take over.

I had never used organic mulch in my California garden, but followed Bert Wilson’s advice (founder of Las Pilitas Nursery) and used inorganic mulch in the form of basketball size rocks on the south/southwest side of a plant. The rock shades the plant a bit as well as the soil above the roots, and also keeps a bit of moisture in the soil. However, it seemed like something was still needed since the casualty rate was still high, especially in the direct-sun portion of my garden.

Listening to members discuss their gardens during the horticulture discussion sessions at the monthly CNPS meetings revealed many of them use gorilla hair or wood chips for mulch. I decided to use small wood chips. My husband and I packed my Pontiac Vibe hatchback with bags and bags of wood chips from Lowes and Home Depot. I emptied dozens of bags around the garden and spread the chips with a garden rake till they were 2-3 inches deep. The brown colored wood chips were the closest to a “natural” color and set off the plants and the garden area from the path. I liked the way the mulch looked when it was spread out and it seems like the plants appreciated the cover.

My only concern was whether the mulch would inhibit volunteers from sprouting but my fears were unfounded. Today I went out and saw some bladderpods and some other unknown plants sprouting. California poppy, Eschscholzia californica, started sprouting through the wood chip mulch a few weeks ago, along with red flax, Linum grandiflorum. (Thanks to Dinah Campbell, who identified them for me when she came over to buy some plants leftover from the plant sale.) Of course the desert marigolds, Baileya multiradiata, are volunteering, albeit in the path, not the garden bed.

The best advice is do what works for your garden. If it is doing fine without mulch, fantastic! But if you think it could use a little something, consider mulch! ✿

Climate Change Corner:
QUESTION: How can humans be so powerful as to impact the entire atmosphere?

SCIENTISTS KNOW OUR CLIMATE IS CHANGING, primarily due to carbon pollution from the burning of dirty energy like oil and coal. It’s true that other factors impact our climate, including other greenhouse gases such as methane. Solar variation, volcanoes, and clouds all affect the climate, too.

Humans, however, release at least 100 times more carbon dioxide into the air than volcanoes.

Emissions from Mount Pinatubo, the strongest volcanic eruption over the past 50 years, amounted to just 0.2 percent of human emissions in 1991.

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