

Undercover Advantages

Mulch Provides Water-Saving Solutions

by LAUREN TURNER

According to the nonprofit Food and Environment Reporting Network (FERN), as of late March 2015, more than 35 percent of the contiguous 48 states were in drought, and California is experiencing the forth-consecutive year of its worst drought ever.

Growers ranging from farmers to landscapers to backyard gardeners are looking for ways to conserve wa-

ter. Many are using mulch to reduce their water usage. Mulch is a slowly decomposing organic material applied around trees and other plants. It provides a protective barrier against water loss, allowing crops to be grown using less water. Growers have been using mulch in their fields and orchards for years, but the drought has brought its advantages into focus.

Agromin is a manufacturer of earth-friendly organic compost products, including mulch that is used by farmers, landscapers and gardeners. The company is based in Oxnard, California, and provides organic soil and mulch supplies throughout several southern California counties. Agromin processes yard trimmings collected from homes and businesses. They use a natural process to turn this

organic material into mulch and other soil amendments that are returned to the soil.

Agromin CEO, Bill Camarillo, and two of his friends started the company in 1991. They started as a small, local company called California Wood Recycling, which processed and sold wood chips to cogeneration power plants. In 1993 they merged with Agromin, already in the soils business, and they purchased Agromin in 1994.

Agromin recognizes that growers need creative ways to make limited water supplies go further. California's drought conditions present far graver problems than can be solved by mulching alone, with its reservoirs dwindling to trickles, and even groundwater reserves being severely depleted. The state's governor has is-



Mulch piles are visible on the farm of this southern California lemon and avocado grower.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF AGROMIN

Mulching's multitude of benefits besides conserving water includes reduction of weeds and control of grass growth.

sued an Executive Order mandating water use restrictions aimed at reducing water use statewide by 25 percent. Many farmers are taking measures such as fallowing fields and making large investments to change to drip irrigation systems. Some farmers are even moving operations out of California to less drought-prone states.

Still, mulching is an excellent way to help conserve water.

"There is no easy solution to fight the effects of the drought – other than a consistent rain, but using organic mulch is one simple approach that produces a multitude of benefits," said Camarillo.

Mulching retains soil moisture, reduces water use, adds and retains soil nutrients including nitrogen, improves soil structure and prevents soil "crusting," allowing water to penetrate deeper into the soil. It is great on slopes, reducing erosion and runoff. A Ventura County Resource Conservation District and U.S. Cooperative Extension multi-year study sponsored by the California Integrated Waste Management Board found that, among other benefits, using mulch made from municipal yard trimmings on commercial citrus orchards reduced evaporation by keeping moisture in the soil, improved water infiltration by reducing surface sealing from rain and irrigation impact and reduced soil erosion and overland flow by as much as 85 to 90 percent.

Mulching's multitude of benefits besides conserving water includes reduction of weeds and control of grass growth. It reduces the need for pesticides and decreases need for oil-based fertilizers and chemicals. It regulates soil temperature by keeping roots cooler in extreme heat and protecting



A citrus orchard before (top) and after mulching.

from cold-weather injury. Mulching protects tree trunks from harvesting and maintenance equipment and can enhance landscape aesthetics.

Using mulch maximizes the value of organic material. Collecting yard and municipal waste for use as mulch allows more room in landfills, and producing mulch reduces greenhouse emissions that would otherwise result

from the material being deposited into landfills, helping to close the recycling loop.

Each month, Agromin receives more than 30,000 tons of organic material. They collect clean leaves, grass clippings, wood and other green material for composting. They do not use sewage sludge or animal waste. The company recycled about 100,000

Christmas trees last holiday season. Agromin crews combed through the mountains of trees four times to find and remove anything nonorganic, including plastic, ornaments and lights. The trees were then passed through a chipper and grinder that shot mulch into piles on the site to be composted. Natural microbial action during the composting process further cleans yard waste. Microbes decompose and break down toxic compounds such as pesticides and heavy metals, neutralizing toxins that would otherwise harm plant and human health. Materials are lab-tested before products are sold, to ensure that bacteria and chemical residue levels fall below EPA standards.

Agromin's success proves that caring for the Earth can be lucrative. They grossed about \$250,000 in their first year and have seen a steady growth of about 21 percent per year. Today, they do business with 90 communities in six southern California counties, recycling organic waste streams. Agromin is the composter for more than 50 California cities. In their area, trash-hauling companies are charged a premium to place green waste in landfills, so it is less costly to



A grinder spews mulch into a pile for curing.

pay Agromin to collect and recycle the waste.

The company now grosses about \$20,000,000 annually. They started with four employees, and now employ more than 100 people, ranging from blue collar truck and tractor operators and packing plant workers, through marketing and accounting and scientific research and development personnel. They have six processing plants, business offices, a fleet of about 15 trucks, plus many contract haulers.

Agromin operates within a radius of about 250 miles, selling their bulk mulch to a wide spectrum of customers, such as farms, parks, golf courses, landscape contractors, sod growers, retail garden centers, nurseries, schools and homeowners. They also have a packaging plant in Nashville, Tennessee, and are looking for other locations to package mulch. At the remote location in Tennessee, they buy compost and other organic raw materials from other composters and blend and package their products under a variety of brand names, including Organic Harvest and EcoScraps, for retail customers. They developed bagged natural soil products that are organically produced without chemicals or human waste. These products meet the same high-quality standards of their commercial line.

Wholesalers in the farm and garden, landscaping equipment and supply and construction businesses carry Agromin's packaged and bulk soil products for their customers. Their products meet green design and building specifications and agricultural certifications while sustainably renewing soil.

Agromin offers four types of mulch in a large assortment of chip sizes to fully serve the needs of their diverse customer base. The ES-2 Mulch is a dark, multi-use recycled wood mulch that offers a great option for large-scale landscapes and farms looking to conserve water. It is ideal for cooling the root zone, reducing moisture loss, controlling erosion and preventing weed growth. It is perfect for all orchard applications and public works as it is classified Environmentally Safe and meets California Department of Transportation specifications.

Play Fiber is soft, non-composted, quality wood mulch. It is safe and attractive, making it a good choice for play and recreation areas. It is also good for top dressing, weed and erosion control, and for use on walkways and pathways. Walk-on Bark and Acorn Bark are Agromin's other two mulch offerings. Both have properties that make them good choices for pathway cover and other compliments to landscape beautification projects.

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Agromin takes the benefits of mulching, and composting in general, to a higher level by reaching out to their community.

They consider themselves fortunate to make their living working with the earth, finding ways to balance economics with ecology. They believe that our health, livelihood and well-being are linked to soil, a connection that has been lost in today's technological world. They take it as their responsibility to raise public awareness about soil sustainability, to meet society's demands from soil while supporting nature's capacity to meet the demand.

To that end, Agromin hosts school field trips to their facilities to teach students about composting, tying in with lessons in school about soil. They recently participated in an agricultural career fair in their community, where they answered questions about careers in organic recycling and sustainable agriculture. They speak to organizations such as garden clubs about composting. This year they sponsored a farm-to-table fundraiser for Boys and Girls Clubs in Santa Clara Valley, seeking to underscore the connection between food and soil.

Mulching is not just useful in the drought-stricken west – it provides the same environmental benefits wherever it is used throughout the country. Companies that produce mulch offer a practical alternative to filling landfills with green waste, thus reducing greenhouse gases. The partially decomposed mulch products further benefit the earth by gradually releasing vital nutrients into soil and by conserving water. The material used to beautify landscapes holds back weeds and other pests such as snails. Founders of mulching/composting companies seem to share a sense of responsibility for operating sustainably while earning a fair profit, and the environmentally friendly nature of their trade makes it easy to redeem that commitment.

RESOURCES

Findings of a Ventura County Resource Conservation District and U.S. Cooperative Extension multi-year study sponsored by the California Integrated Waste Management Board produced are available through the Ventura County Resource Conservation District at P.O. Box 147, 3380 Somis Road, Somis, CA 93066 805-386-4685 or the University of California Cooperative Extension at 669 County Square Drive, Suite 100, Ventura, CA 93003-5401; 805-645-1458.

One of the largest similar companies to Agromin is Garick, located in Ohio, servicing the eastern half of the country. Mulch has been an important part of their product line since 1998. Garick purports to be as committed to preserving the environment and using natural resources sustainably as they are to profit. They bill themselves as "Nature's Helper." Like Agromin, they deliver education about composting and soil health and donate mulching and soil-amending products to school gardening projects. They support the communities where they do business, associating with numerous like-minded businesses and organizations.

Living Earth Technologies sells both bulk and bagged mulch at 20 locations in the Dallas-Fort Worth and Houston, Texas, areas. The company started in 1985 with a single location in Houston and has steadily grown from there.

Living Earth conforms to the model of turning what would otherwise be a huge stockpile of municipal waste into useful, earth-friendly products. The service they provide is recognized as a win-win for the community, the landfill and the environment. Like Agromin and Garick, Living Earth is also involved in public education and participates in related school and community projects. In their

own words, Living Earth is "proud of its strong track record of communicating with and being involved with the local communities in which it operates facilities." The company is involved with numerous industry organizations. They also attend as many home and garden shows as possible, including a number of Earth Day events, to answer questions and help meet the needs of both landscaping professionals and home owners.

Whatever the application may be, for large landscapes, farms, or your backyard, there are clearly benefits to choosing mulch. It is widely available in bags from many home and garden supply stores, and in bulk from companies like Agromin, Garick, and Living Earth Technologies. We can all join these companies as land stewards by choosing mulch. You may be able to locate other resources in your community by contacting your city offices or your local agriculture Extension office.

NEED MORE INFORMATION?

For more information about Agromin visit www.agromin.com. For information on Garick, visit www.garick.com. For further information about Living Earth Technologies visit livingearth.net.

Lauren Turner is a freelance writer, specializing in agricultural, environmental and community topics. She retired from a 30-year career with the U.S. Forest Service, where she worked as a Wildlife Biologist, Ecosystem Manager and District Ranger. An avid organic gardener, she lives in Sequim, Washington with her husband and their three cats.