

The image is a vertical photograph showing a close-up of a lawn. The top portion of the image shows a dense, vibrant green lawn. Below this, there is a clear border where the lawn meets a layer of reddish-brown mulch. In this mulched area, several weeds with long, narrow green leaves are growing. The lighting is bright, suggesting a sunny day.

# Not All Proposals Are Created Equal

by Amy Heuser

**B**efore you decide from whom to purchase your mulch and soil, be sure you are educated on the industry so you can make the smartest choices possible, all while being aware of the many deceptive practices some companies may use when they submit a proposal for your job. Just keep in mind: not all proposals are created equal.

## 1. What is in my mulch?

The first, and probably most important, question to ask yourself and your vendor is: “What is in my mulch?” Many companies use construction and demolition (C & D) wood, pressure treated wood and painted or varnished woods in their mulch. These types of materials contain heavy metals such as ARSENIC, copper, and chromium. Look for companies that can guarantee you (with current tests results) that their product doesn’t contain dangerous amounts of these toxins. As for colorant, look for companies that only use NON-toxic and environmentally safe colorants in their mulch. Additionally, look for a colorant that is specially formulated with binders to minimize color wash-off. This will enable you to enjoy your colored mulch much longer and save money on remulching.

## 2. What type of company should I look for when purchasing my mulch and soil?

You will always save money when hiring a company that manufactures, delivers, and installs their own product, cutting out middlemen trying to make profits. Doing business with these “one-stop-shops” will earn you the ease of one affordable payment and you save time when making your service schedule.

Another way to decrease your middleman costs in regard to groundcover is to take your mulching service out of your landscape contract and deal directly with a mulch installation company. Landscaping companies on average mark up mulching services 20%–30% when they hire outside of their own company. (Most landscaping companies do not own their own blow-on installation trucks.)

## 3. What type of mulch should I be wary of?

In many garden supply stores and nurseries, you are likely to see bags of Cypress mulch for sale, but many people don’t realize that by purchasing this product buyers create an increasing threat to Florida’s wetlands. In the past, Cypress mulch was produced mainly from the bi-products of lumber operations, but the increased demand for mulch



has led to the use of whole trees and entire forests for nothing but mulch. Thousands of acres of Cypress are logged every year simply for mulch production, increasing the amount of clear-cuts from our native wetlands. These destroyed Cypress trees are not being replanted. (Establishing the proper hydrology for Cypress seed germination is difficult and rarely accomplished by anyone.) When a Cypress area is clear-cut and bare, that land is easily taken over by invasive pest plants like Brazilian Pepper. Sometimes, the land is planted in Pine for future logging or drained for development. Either way, the Cypress forest and its wetland wildlife is not replaced.

If deciding to purchase Cypress mulch, customers need to keep in mind that

Cypress mulch blends are mostly made up of other types of wood and usually only contain a small amount of pure Cypress mulch. Even when purchasing these Cypress blends, customers should be aware that purchasing any amount of Cypress can be damaging to the environment and Cypress-free mulch is always better!

#### 4. What are ecologically friendly mulch variations to look for?

Ecologically friendly mulch variations to purchase are Melaleuca and Australian Pine. These are invasive, non-native trees to Florida. Melaleuca trees have taken over approximately 500,000 acres of Florida Everglades, so turning the trees into mulch helps rid the state of these terrible pest plants. Just be sure that your Melaleuca is heat-treated to kill any seeds. These mulch varieties are also known to be long-lasting and Melaleuca may be termite-resistant.

#### 5. Why should I choose blow-on installation over bulk?

When looking into the installation of your products, it is a good idea to get educated on the newest technology available. Blow-on installation is the newest way to have mulch and soil installed. There are a lot of reasons why you should choose this service over traditional forms of installation, the most important reason being price! Take into consideration the time it takes to manually spread your mulch and soil. Manual spreading of 60 cubic yards can take more than a day to install with landscape crews, while tying up your laborers. When you use a blow-on crew to install the same amount, it can be completed in two to three hours. This also eliminates the risk to landscape crews

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doing dangerous roadwork. With blow-on installation, you can use more product for the same price because of the money you are saving on labor costs. The blow-on truck's 400 feet or more of installation hose allows those difficult-to-reach and labor-intensive areas to be covered: berms, across canals, over walls and on rooftops.

**6. Are you getting what you paid for, or is your vendor blowing it on too thin?**

Don't let your vendor blow your product on too thin! To guarantee you are getting what you paid for, establish how deep the mulch will be installed before your blow-on job commences. This can be a very important factor to ensure you are receiving the correct amount of mulch. For example, if a company agrees to install mulch at two inches, but only installs one inch, a price of \$30 a yard becomes \$60 a yard. This could result in your spending hundreds, if not thousands, of dollars for a product you never received.

**7. How do I know how much I received?**

An easy way to determine that you are getting the correct amount of mulch is to simply count the number of truckloads used and make sure the trucks are full and then make sure the truck is empty when they leave. Simple calculations will help you to determine how much mulch was used to complete the job. Choose a company that has a "checks and balances" system where they monitor and control how much mulch is being installed by each truck on each job. Vendors should inspect their trucks before they leave their yard to verify how much mulch was loaded and once the truck returns to the yard it should, again, be inspected to determine how much mulch remains. If this "checks and balances" practice is being used, the paperwork to back it up should be available to all customers upon request.

**8. What if I want to buy bags?**

If choosing to buy mulch in bags, be aware that a standard bag of mulch generally holds two cubic feet. Many companies have found a quick, but dishonest, way to make money on their bag

sales by only filling their bags with one and a half cubic feet of mulch, but sell them as full two cubic foot bags.

If a company sells these partial bags for \$1.40, the customer is actually paying the equivalent of \$1.87 for two cubic feet of mulch. A customer who contracts for installation of these partial bags of mulch could possibly end up paying double what they should.

**9. Do you want the guarantee of not being left in the dust by your vendor?**

A customer needs to feel they were not taken advantage of by their vendor. Look for companies with a "Satisfaction Guarantee." One way to avoid negligence by your vendor is to inform your sales representative that you will not pay for a job until the work is inspected. If you have any complaints or concerns, your vendor should be available to address those issues immediately.

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