

PRESS RELEASE



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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

“ROCK OUT” IS NOT JUST A HIP PHRASE

Do Arroyo Stones Around the Trunk Help Oaks?

Often you will see arroyo stones around the base of oak trees, usually in a single layer carefully arranged, but occasionally just as they fell from the wheelbarrow. Why are they there? Is this an ancient therapy for ailing trees learned from the native Indians when we started to occupy their oak woodlands in Southern California? This is not likely because oaks survived better, despite our intervention, in the natural dry summer environment that existed before we planted our lush water hungry gardens.

Rocks are decorative and fit the arroyo look particularly if your architecture or landscape incorporates similar stones. Everyone should know it is not good to plant flowers or water a lawn under oaks. But, bare dirt is considered by some to be unattractive in a garden or a waste of good planting opportunities. Rocks give texture. They provide a hard surface that can be blown leaf free for that fastidiously neat gardener. And they certainly don't need water, which is good for gardens in a naturally arid environment like ours.

An oak tree doesn't care what material is placed on the surface around it as long as it is porous and well drained. What it doesn't like is water retained in the soil around the roots in the warmer months. Rocks, which function as mulch, help to retain moisture in the soil because they inhibit evaporation. This moist soil in the summer then encourages oak root fungus, indigenous to our soils, to spread faster than the tree can resist. But the cause of disease is not the rock; it is the water. Keep the area absolutely dry after winter rains and the rocks cause no harm. Allow overspray or runoff in a landscape environment to accumulate under the rocks and conditions are right for oak root fungus.

A better condition for oaks is dry, uncultivated space, with a light natural accumulation of oak leaf mulch as far away from the trunk as you can aesthetically tolerate. If you must plant, put in a few drought and shade tolerant plants to jazz it up. Spot water sparingly to get them established in the soil or even in pots above grade.

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