

Tree Planting Article

Information provided by Gerry Bates, Community Forestry Assistant

The key to giving a tree a healthy start in the planting site is good planting procedures. Stress and physiological disorders can often be traced to poor planting practices. There is no one right way to plant a tree—there is only the method that works for you and the tree you've chosen. One point however, that cannot be over-emphasized is the importance of matching the tree and its requirements to the planting site conditions. The best planting procedures known will not save a tree that is poorly suited for its site. The tree must be able to tolerate site conditions such as wet or dry soils, size limitations or shade. Selecting a tree that meets the site requirements is the single most important factor in influencing the success of the plant.

Tree planting demonstrations are the best way to get trees planted correctly. Ask a local urban forestry professional or a friendly nurseryman for a planting demonstration. It's a real shame to spend months planning a planting and dollars on trees only to have the trees planted poorly. New planting procedures are developed frequently and the method will vary depending on each type of tree. Many people say they've been planting for years, but an update never hurts.

Trees are generally available from the nursery in one of three forms: bare root, balled and burlapped, or containerized. Each form has its advantages and disadvantages. Most importantly, select a tree that is healthy and vigorous. The condition of the plant, particularly roots in the root ball, affects the chances for transplant success. New root growth is dependent on stored energy reserves inside the plant. Inspect the roots and aerial portions of the tree before planting. On containerized and balled and burlapped trees, new growth on the roots should be abundant and white. Brown or black non-woody roots indicate a health problem. For balled and burlapped trees, check to see that the ball is solid, with little or no movement at the trunk. Wounds on the trunk or branches of the tree may become sites of entry for insects or disease spores.

Bare root trees are usually small and easy to transplant. Usually, only deciduous trees are sold bare root. Since there is no soil on the roots, they are lightweight. It is vital to keep the roots moist, covered, and in a cool location (33-40 degrees) at all times preceding planting. When you are ready to plant, remove and discard all packing material. Cut away any broken roots and trim long roots rather than bending or doubling them in planting. Dig the hole large enough so that the roots will easily fit without pressing against the sides and so the plant will be at the same depth as it was in the nursery. Bare root trees should be planted on small, compacted mounds within the planting hole. The roots should be spread and distributed over the mound. Hold the plant erect and fill in around it with improved soil until the hole is 2/3 full. Water thoroughly using a diluted solution of vitamin B-1 with the water. Exposure of the roots to air must be minimized to reduce drying. Continue filling the hole with soil until it matches the surrounding grade. Since the root system is limited, trees that are planted bare root may require staking.

Many trees are balled and burlapped in the nursery. Trees are dug with the root balls intact. Although much of the absorbing root is lost in the digging process, some roots are preserved in the root ball. The burlap used to wrap the root ball keeps the roots from drying out from exposure to air. Often the burlap is secured around the trunk of the tree with non-biodegradable twine. It is very important to cut this twine and remove it from around the trunk once the tree is placed in the hole. If it is not removed, it may restrict the growth of the tree and actually girdle the trunk causing the tree to die. Some larger balled and burlapped trees come in wire baskets to maintain the integrity of the root ball in handling. Dig a hole approximately 50 percent wider and the same depth as the root ball. Fill the hole approximately 2/3 full and water thoroughly. Then, cut the burlap and wire basket away from the root ball, down at least 1/3 from the top. Fill the hole so that it matches the surrounding grade. Work the soil around the ball so that no air pockets are left. Large pockets of air can allow the roots to dry out. Firm the soil so that the tree is vertical and adequately supported, but do not pack the soil.

Containerized trees have their roots in soil. When selecting containerized trees, it is best to check the root system. Not all containerized trees are container grown. Often bare root trees are potted in containers and sold in the nursery. If they are not held for a year, there will not be an established root system in the container. Unless the container is biodegradable, such as a natural peat pot, the container must be removed before planting. Often, when a tree is inside a container for an extended period of time, it will become root bound and the roots will grow in circles around the pot. These roots should be separated and spread out within the hole. If the roots are densely matted, the outside of the root mass should be sliced vertically with a sharp knife in a few places. Dig the hole about 50 percent wider and slightly deeper than the pot. Carefully remove the container. If it is tapered it will slide off when tapped on. If it is not tapered cut the container down the sides and remove the plant from it. It is extremely important to keep the earth ball intact. Set the plant in the hole with enough soil underneath to bring the top of the root ball even with the surrounding grade. Hold the tree erect and fill with soil until it is approximately 2/3 full. Water thoroughly and continue to fill until the hole is filled. Remove all tags or labels so that they will not girdle the trunk or branches as the tree grows.

“A day without sunshine is like, well, night.” Bates