

Planting for Healthy Trees

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One of the unfortunate losses that generally occur with urbanization is a reduction in the number of trees in a community. People need trees. They will cool or landscape on hot days, give us oxygen to breathe, filter out pollutants often seen in or large cities, provide food and shelter for wildlife and beautify our landscape adding value to our homes. But trees also need people! Many gardeners believe that trees will grow healthy by themselves as they see healthy trees growing in natural environments. In the urban landscape however, we must care for our trees for them to grow healthy.

Begin by selecting the right tree species for your landscape taking into account soil conditions, maintenance available and mature height and width. Plant the tree properly, then provide timely maintenance throughout its life. Whenever possible, schedule your tree plantings during the dormant season. This will be a time of slow growth, allowing the root system to become established before the plant is taxed by summer weather. The earlier in the fall you can plant your trees, the longer the root system will have to grow. Spring and summer plantings are possible if water is available. However, the chance of tree failure increases the further into summer you go with heat and drought taking its toll. After proper tree selection, the next important step is to dig the planting hole.

New research shows a change in the way we dig our holes for tree planting. Survivability will greatly increase if you dig a wide hole no deeper than the depth of the root ball. Using a shovel or tiller, loosen the soil no deeper than the root ball and out from the trunk in an area three times the root ball diameter. Amending sandy soils with organic matter will be useful if you can apply enough compost or peat moss to create a 50-50 mixture. Be careful in adding organic matter to heavy soils as this addition may cause the soil to hold more moisture than wanted. Dig a shallow hole in the middle of the tilled area to a depth where the top of the root ball is sitting level with or slightly higher than the existing ground. Be sure to not loosen the soil below the root ball.

Before planting your tree, brush back the soil on the root ball and find the first root flare. The area of the tree where the first root emerges from the main trunk should be level with the top of your bed. If your new tree is balled and burlapped, remove any wire and ropes holding the ball together along with any material covering the ball that will not decay. On containerized plants, carefully lift the tree from the container and cut any circulating roots by making four to five vertical slits along the sides of the root ball. With either planting procedure, be sure the roots do not dry out. Place the tree into the shallow hole backfilling with soil from the planting area and firm the backfill to eliminate any air pockets. Finally, mulch the root zone with quality mulch and maintain adequate moisture. Staking is not necessary unless the plant is placed in high wind areas or gale force storms are forecast.