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Extension Solutions for Homes and Gardens

by Paul J. Pugliese

“Plant a Tree for Arbor Day: Tips for Planting Trees Right!”

In Georgia, Arbor Day is celebrated annually on the third Friday of February. The Canton Tree City Commission will be hosting Arbor Day events on Friday February 20, 2009. There are 2,600 seedlings to be given out and five different species: Virginia Pine, Bald Cypress, Dogwood, Redbud and Wax Myrtle. The event will be held at the gazebo in downtown Canton from 10 a.m. until 5:30 p.m. Master Gardener volunteers through our Extension office help with the event and are available to assist with any questions that you may have about the trees or any other home horticulture questions. So if you are in Canton on February 20th, stop by and get a FREE tree (or two) to celebrate Arbor Day!

Here are a few quick tips on planting trees right. When planting trees, there are a few common mistakes that people always make. However, you can easily avoid these mistakes and follow proper planting procedures recommended by UGA Extension experts! Remember, proper planting results in healthy, water-efficient plants—which might pay off during the next drought.

Do not put water into the hole before the tree is planted. Instead, water the root ball heavily before planting. Remove **all** (that means **all**) bindings, ties, wires, burlap or other wrapping from the tree's roots and trunk. For larger trees, remove all ties and as much packaging material as possible. Do not leave trees in wire baskets or surrounded by any other kind of material or fabric. Any materials left surrounding the tree will disrupt root growth and affect long-term root distribution.

Do not change soil texture. Changing soil texture by amending the soil or by layering different materials in the planting hole is bad for tree roots because it disrupts normal water movement and water holding capacity within the soil. Till or break up existing soil over the entire planting site, as much as ten times the root ball diameter to encourage good tree root growth. The actual planting hole should be at least three times the diameter of your tree's root ball, but never go deeper than the root ball itself. It's always better to dig the planting hole a couple inches too shallow than too deep and holes should have highly slanted sides e.g. 45 degree angle.

Gently break up and disrupt the nursery soil around the roots of your tree before planting. Place the tree in the hole on a compacted pedestal so the tree doesn't settle and then carefully backfill with existing native soil. Do not add any type of soil amendment or fertilizer to the native soil fill or the hole. Trees need time to react and adjust to the new growing site. After the first growing season, a conservative fertilization program based upon a soil test can be instituted. In heavy-clay soils, it is better to plant trees one inch too high than one inch too low.

After the tree is planted, extensively water the entire planting site to help settle the soil and minimize large air pockets. A 3-5" inch layer of mulch should cover an area at least two times larger than the planting hole. Larger mulch islands can greatly reduce weed competition and maintenance problems. Try to encourage roots to grow into the native soil by mulching larger areas. Avoid mulching too deeply and creating mulch “volcanoes” which can cause trees to suffer severe drought stress as a result of shedding water and shallow rooting!

Water rings are basins or berms of soil built-up around the tree to help with water infiltration. Because they can disrupt proper root system development, generally they should not be used. In cases of severe maintenance, topography or soil infiltration problems where you must build a water basin around a tree, build it well beyond the edge of the planting hole. The water basin should never be smaller than or the same size as the planting hole. Water rings should **always** be removed after establishment or by the end of the second growing season.

Avoid establishing additional plants such as azaleas, ground covers, turfgrass or annuals around a tree. Use mulch to minimize interference from plant competition. Interference from other plants can stress a tree and make other stressful conditions (e.g. drought) worse. If it is necessary to establish additional plants around a tree, wait until the tree is well established at three to seven years old. Plant trees correctly and they will provide you with a host of values over a long life. Poor planting leads to stress, pests, and growth problems that ruin even the best. By following these simple tips and avoiding common mistakes, anyone can plant a tree for Arbor Day!

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Optional Quote if space is available:

Perhaps this quote will inspire you to go plant a tree for Arbor Day this year:

“Trees are a part of delineating our lives through time. Events, thresholds, life-changes, and social agreements are marked by established trees or by tree plantings. Legends are bounded and myths humanized by tree connections. Before there were social systems for building elaborate obelisks, plaques and monuments, and even now when "hard" monuments could be built, trees are the markers for lives and times. Trees are a heritage for us on many levels.”—Dr. Kim Coder