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Extension Solutions for Homes and Gardens

by Paul J. Pugliese

“Top 10 Landscape Mistakes”

As we pass through another spring, local county Extension offices are buzzing with lots of calls from home gardeners and landscapers with just about every tree, shrub, flower, and lawn question you can imagine. Over and over, county Extension agents have conversations with people that say they heard or saw someone else plant something a certain way, they followed suit, and then problems happen. Unfortunately, most folks call our office after it's too late. This article highlights the top landscape mistakes that agents see and hear about all too often. Hopefully, you can avoid future problems by changing some old habits and learning from the mistakes of your neighbors.

1. Leaving burlap, straps, ropes, or wire cages on a newly planted tree or shrub root ball is not okay. Any material left on the root ball could potentially restrict root growth and create a “pot-bound” root system. There is greater potential for root problems if these materials are in the way. Therefore, to avoid these problems all burlap, straps, containers, or cages should be cut off and removed prior to planting. Also, all stakes, ties, or tags should be removed to avoid girdling the stems of plants.
2. As a general rule, it is better to not use any soil amendments than to use them the wrong way. Soil amendments or compost should never be backfilled into a planting hole with new trees or shrubs. Soil amendments act like a sponge and either stay too wet when it rains or too dry during a drought. These extreme changes in soil moisture can cause major problems for plants' roots. Soil amendments are better used over large planting areas, such as vegetable gardens, by thoroughly mixing 2” to 3” inches of compost in with the clay subsoil several inches deep to create a uniform soil profile.
3. Planting trees and shrubs too deep creates long-term, irreversible problems. When plants are buried too deep, there is greater potential for root rot, stem rot, bark cracking, and disease. To avoid this, all plants should be inspected prior to planting to find and expose the root flare, where the first set of major roots meets the stem. This root flare should be level with the existing grade around the planting hole or slightly higher for certain plants such as Azaleas that need well drained roots. Be sure to have a firm foundation of soil under larger trees so they don't settle after planting.
4. Knowing the names of your plants and their specific cultural needs (light, water, and space) is probably the single most important part of plant installation and maintenance. Do your homework before you buy a new tree or shrub. Find out how tall and how wide the plant gets and make sure you plant in a spot that allows enough room to reach its mature size. Plants that are placed too close will eventually shade each other out, compete for water and nutrients, and diseases will spread more quickly between them.
5. It's important to take the time to read and follow the label before using any chemical or pesticide in your lawn or garden. Even if it's an organic or natural product, you should closely follow the directions. All chemicals have the potential to cause damage to plants if applied at the wrong rate, the wrong time, or in the wrong place. Also, be sure to follow any safety precautions listed for personal protection equipment. And, be sure that your lawn type or plant is listed on the label or else there's a good chance it could get damaged. Consider all the other alternatives to pesticides first.
6. Trees should never be topped when pruning; it destroys the branching control and shape of a tree. Improper pruning and topping often leads to more problems with tree branches dying and shortens the life of a tree. The only trees that may need to be topped are ones that were planted in the wrong place and are growing toward overhead obstacles. Never plant medium or large trees near or under utility lines, awnings, or anywhere else that will require extensive pruning to keep them from damaging property. Pick the right tree for the right site.

7. Applying the wrong amount of fertilizer or lime can be avoided simply by doing a soil test every few years on your lawn or garden. Applying too much fertilizer is not only a waste of money, but it can potentially burn plants. Excess nutrients that are not used by plants can become a source of water pollution. Also, applying fertilizer at the wrong time of the year can cause major weed and disease problems for lawns and plants. A soil test will tell you exactly how much lime or fertilizer you need to apply, if any, and when to apply it for your particular lawn or plants. For more information, go to www.soiltest123.com.
8. More plants are killed in Georgia from too much water than from the lack of water. Many root stress and disease problems are the result of over watering. As a general rule, established landscape plants and lawns only need about 1" inch of rain every 7 to 10 days. Therefore, if you get that much of rain in your rain gauge in one week, your irrigation should be turned off the following week and not turned back on as long as there is rain in the forecast.
9. Plants don't live forever and some plants are shorter lived than others. There are numerous examples of plants that should be avoided such as Bradford Pears, Euonymus, and Red Tip Photinia. In the case of Bradford Pear trees, they generally live for about 15-20 years and when a strong wind or storm comes along, they literally self-destruct and their branches will break due to their weak branch structure. Euonymus shrubs are short lived because they always end up getting destroyed by powdery mildew and scale insects. Red Tip Photinias are often short lived due to a major leaf spot disease that will kill every leaf in a matter of weeks. Therefore, do your homework and avoid those plants that are not recommended for Georgia's climate.
10. The last common landscape mistake is going overboard with mulch. Mulch is an extremely valuable tool for conserving soil moisture, protecting tree roots, and keeping weeds down. However, many people go to the extreme of applying deep mounds of mulch, often referred to as "mulch volcanoes" at the bases of trees. Never apply more than 2" to 3" inches of mulch around the root zone of trees and shrubs. You can go as far as twice the canopy width of trees to protect tree roots, but never go too deep. When mulch volcanoes are created several inches deep around the trunks of trees, there is potential for root rot, stem rot, disease, and insect problems. Also, avoid raking leaves or pine needles into piles at the bottom of tree trunks.

Please share this article with your friends and neighbors. Help change their habits by setting a good example for others to follow as a gardener who learns from experience. Perhaps the best advice is to think like a plant: If I were a tree, how would I like my feet strapped to a cage, my arms amputated, buried alive in compost, smothered in mulch, and drowning in too much water?

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