

# PLANT A TREE FOR ARBOR DAY: TIPS FOR PLANTING TREES RIGHT

by Paul J. Pugliese

*"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



In Georgia, Arbor Day is celebrated annually on the third Friday of February. The Canton Tree City Commission will be hosting special events 10 a.m.-5:30 p.m. February 20 at the gazebo in downtown Canton, including distribution of 2,600 seedlings of Virginia Pine, Bald Cypress, Dogwood, Redbud and Wax Myrtle trees. Master Gardener

volunteers through our extension office will be on hand to answer questions about the trees or any other home horticulture topics. If you are in Canton on February 20th, stop by and get a FREE tree (or two) to celebrate Arbor Day!

There are a few common mistakes that many people make when planting trees. Avoid these mistakes by following 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. On 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 around 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 normal water movement and water holding capacity is disrupted. 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. Holes should have highly slanted sides, such as a 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. Generally, water rings should not be used because they can disrupt proper root system development. 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, turf grass 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 trees. By following these simple tips and avoiding common mistakes, anyone can plant a tree for Arbor Day!

*Paul Pugliese is the Agriculture & Natural Resources Extension Agent for Cherokee County Cooperative Extension, a partnership of The University of Georgia, The U.S. Department of Agriculture, and Cherokee County. (770) 479-0418. For more information and free publications, visit the local website at [www.ugaextension.com/cherokee](http://www.ugaextension.com/cherokee)*