

Take Steps to Protect Trees in the Landscape

Mature trees are a valuable commodity in the landscape. We enjoy their majestic beauty, fall color and the shade of large mature trees. I suppose because of their size, we often overlook them as we care for more tender plants like annual flowers or shrubs.

As resilient as trees are to abuses from Mother Nature and sometimes from our neglect, trees can and do die. One of the stresses that is toughest on trees is during landscaping or construction. Whether building a new home on a wooded site or putting in a paved driveway, consider the possible ways that trees can be damaged or killed.

Physical damage from being hit by heavy equipment bumps into a tree can cause obvious wounding to the trunk. It may not look bad to us, but if a sizable amount of the cambium layer is damaged, the tree will die because this layer of thin bark is responsible for transporting food and water.

Adding soil or removing soil often results in a decline or death of trees. Removing as little as two inches of our clay soil can kill trees because many of the feeder roots are located close to the surface. Adding soil, even as little as three inches over these feeder roots, can also cause trees to basically suffocate.

If trenching is needed, say for water lines or underground cable, plan for the least impact to tree roots. When large anchor-type roots are cut, the tree may not die immediately but the tree may become prone to falling. There is equipment that can tunnel the utility lines under trees without cutting roots.

Avoid parking heavy equipment or stockpiling building materials underneath trees. Soil compaction is a silent killer of trees although it may take several years.

If you are planning on construction activities, set up a tree protection zone round trees you want to keep. The size of the zone depends on the size of the tree. It is recommended to measure the diameter of the tree 4.5 feet from the ground and multiply this by 2.5. This results in the diameter of root protection.

If selecting trees on a site to keep versus those that need to go, it's best to seek the services of a certified arborist. An arborist is also a great resource for advice on removing damaged trees or ones that may pose a risk to people or property. You can find a list of certified arborists on the website of the International Society of Arboriculture.

Yes, large trees for the most part can take care of themselves. Sometimes, though, we try too hard to care for them. Large established trees in the landscape generally receive adequate nutrition, especially if you are feeding the lawn. While mulch is a great thing, trees of any size do not need mulch piled up against the trunk like little volcanoes. This actually is keeping the bark wetter than it needs and is more susceptible to decay.