

Planting Trees

Although fall is the best time to plant trees, we often do not get planting fever until spring. Spring is also a good time to plant. However, it is never a good time to plant if you are not going to do it properly. Take time to do it right and your tree should reward you with many years of valuable service. Time spent preparing the soil and planting now is an investment that will pay compounded interest for many years to come.

This article by James Midcap, University of Georgia Horticulturist, gives us the latest tips on how to plan and plant for success. It is entitled 'The Best Way to Plant Trees.

We need to change the way we think about trees and the way we plant them. The American Forestry Association, in cooperation with the National Urban Forest Council, has drawn up guidelines for how to plant a tree, and you may find some surprises.

Plant trees so roots have a chance to grow into the surrounding soil and produce healthy, vigorous branches, foliage, and roots. Instead of a planting hole, make a large planting area that is wide but not deep, with soil that is loose for root growth. The larger the area, the better.

After selecting a good location, mark out a planting area at least five times the diameter of the planting ball. Use a rototiller or shovel to loosen and mix the soil in this entire area to a depth of about 12 inches. Organic matter can be added to the loosened soil as long as the material is used uniformly throughout the area.

In the center of the prepared area, dig a shallow hole to set the tree. The hole should allow the root ball to sit on solid ground rather than loose soil. Once the ball is set in the hole, its upper surface should be level with the existing soil. After the tree is properly set, cut and remove the rope, twine or wires holding the burlap in place and circling the trunk on balled and burlapped trees. Position the tree with the main stem straight up.

Fill around the roots and gently pack the soil to prevent major air pockets. Do not pack the soil too hard. Water can be used instead of your foot to settle the soil. This helps prevent over packing. Rake the soil evenly over the entire area, and cover it with two to four inches of mulch -- bark, wood chips, old sawdust,

pine needles, leaf mold, or the like. Some mulches decompose quickly and will have to be replenished once or twice a year. Maintain the mulch layer to improve growth.

Some people suggest mounding the soil at the outer edge of the planting ring to form a water-holding berm. The berm will help hold water, but it may also encourage the root growth to remain within the berm, close to the tree. The American Forestry Association does not recommend berms.

It is best not to stake the tree, but if wind is a problem or if the tree starts to lean, support it with a flexible stake so the trunk will sway in the wind. Movement is necessary for building the trunk's strength. Remove the stake and wire after one year since leaving wire around the tree can kill it.

Do not wrap the trunk with a tree wrap. It will slow the tree's ability to adapt to the site and may provide a cozy home for insects. The wrap is often held in place with ties at the top and bottom, which will strangle a tree just as wire will. The tree needs air and sunlight to develop a healthy, protective bark.

We admit this method of tree planting is more involved. New information requires more thought and more labor, but the result is rewarding. We estimate young trees can grow twice as fast when planted correctly and will live at least twice as long as trees improperly set out.