UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA COOPERATIVE EXTENSION

HOW TO PLANT A TREE

The performance of a landscape tree depends a great deal on how it is planted. Please remember these points.

1. If the tree is to mature in the landscape, it will have to grow in the soil of the planting site.
2. Elaborate preparation of the soil in the planting hole merely provides another artificial container for the tree, and will not ensure continued growth of your tree.
3. If the soil at the planting site will not satisfactorily sustain a tree, extensive conditioning and modification will be needed in a large area.
4. Roots grow and develop in moist soil where oxygen is available. Roots grow little or not at all in dry soil or in soil that is saturated with water and has no oxygen.

Digging the hole: Plant the young tree high, whether it is bareroot, balled or container grown. Dig the hole no deeper than necessary - approximately 2 inches less than the depth of the soil in the container or the depth of the soil ball. Planting the tree deeper or in loose soil may lead to future crown rot problems. Loose soil in the bottom of the hole will settle, causing the tree to be planted deeper than intended. It may be necessary to dig deeply to break up soils that have been compacted by construction. When digging compacted soils, mix organic matter to a very large circle around the tree site. Do not create a "flower pot effect" by adding organic matter to a small hole which will just fill up with water and drown the tree. Gravel drains can be created for severe drainage problems; drains can even be installed that move water away to the sewer system such as in a street tree planting strip.

Competition from Turf: Keep turf away from the trunk as far as you can. The growth of a young tree will be retarded by turf. A 30 inch minimum bare space between tree and turf will also protect the trunk from lawnmowers and weed whackers.

Watering and fertilization: The basin for watering the newly planted tree should be so constructed that water will drain away from the trunk. Irrigate at planting to settle the soil around the roots. Do not put fertilizer in the hole but lightly fertilize in the growing season with either a water soluble or granular fertilizer. Small amounts of fertilizer used frequently in spring and summer are best. Fertilizer tablets are expensive and their effectiveness is debated. Water deeply in the basin, if on a drip system leave on long enough that the root ball is really wetted well. Test the soil moisture with your hands. Dig around a little to be sure the root ball is getting soaked.

Staking: If the tree is tall and wispy, use two stakes on either side about a foot away from the trunk. The best ties are old nylon stockings! Second best is green stretchy horticulture tape. Do not use wire even if protected by hose. You want the tree to have some movement to develop strong trunk cells. Do not tie tightly to a stake.

What is a good nursery tree?: Look at the tree ideally before you buy it, or as soon as shipment arrives and before you sign for it. Look for kinked or circling roots. If in a container, lift the trunk -- if it comes up and seems loose there may be kinked roots. Have they been in the container too long? Some root pruning can be done to correct mildly circling roots or a kink but reject any trees with serious problems. There should be many side branches and the tree not striped up high. You want small low branches for the first years to allow leaves to produce good girth and shade for the trunk.

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