



More Garden Dirt

Great garden tips from Living Landscapes!

Healthy Trees Start with Proper Planting

Capricious April snow showers may give us pause, but the airy white pear canopies and delicately pink plum blossoms reassure us that spring is here to stay. Daffodils and forsythia may whisper of spring, but they don't approach the resonance of a maple unfurling its leaves. Trees have a presence and an impact on humans and their environments that is unsurpassed by other plants.

Deciduous trees protect our homes from the heat of the summer sun while allowing it to warm us in the winter. They block the wind, deflect the rain and help reduce storm run-off and flooding. They create a private haven, enhance our architecture and screen unpleasant views while emphasizing others. We plant trees for their beauty, their shade and for the sense of tranquility, strength and permanence that they impart.

In short, trees are our most important landscape investment. It only makes sense then, to give them the best, possible start on a long and healthy life. To insure your trees' good health, remember some important guidelines when planting.

Avoid planting trees too deep. A common cause of tree decline and death is burying the root collar (the area where trunk and root ball meet) and surrounding roots with too much soil. If the collar and root ball are planted too deep, the roots will decline. As the tree's health begins to suffer, it will exhibit stunted growth, undersized leaves, poor color and an increased susceptibility to disease. The tree will begin to show signs of decay, cracking and dead wood. It may take a few years, but the tree will most likely sicken and die.

To prevent the aforementioned horror, dig your planting hole wider (2 to 3 times), but never deeper than the root ball. The finished planting level of the root collar (and top of the root ball) should be 2 to 3 inches above the surrounding grade. This allows for some settling to occur without burying the collar. Before backfilling, remove all twine (including sisal) and peel the burlap away from the trunk.

If you have a great deal of sand or clay, it's a good idea to amend with quality topsoil and compost to improve your sandy soil's capacity to retain water and clay soil's ability to drain. Be sure, however, to mix the amendments with the existing soil to insure that the roots will reach beyond the planting hole and into the surrounding area. As you fill around the root ball, gently tamp the soil and water generously to



Tree Planting continued –

remove all air pockets.

Some sources caution against staking a newly planted tree, because some movement of the trunk actually encourages the development of a stronger root system. With this in mind, we never stake a tree too tightly and always allow some play in the trunk. Living along the coast with a great deal of wind and sandy soil, however, we find it necessary to support a newly planted trunk within its root ball by staking it for the first year. On the most exposed and windy coastal sites, in fact, we may stake a tree for two years – always checking, of course, to make sure that the chainlock has not become too tight around the growing trunk.

Spread 2 to 4 inches of mulch around the tree and out to the drip line to conserve moisture, cool the roots and suppress the weeds. Make sure that the mulch is several inches away from the trunk, however, to avoid causing the same decline that results from burying the collar.

Check frequently to be sure that the soil remains moist around the root ball and water as often as necessary to maintain that moisture well into the fall. Follow these guidelines and before you know it, lush, lovely and healthy trees will transform your landscape.