

Sustainable Landscaping – Tree Planting

Thanks to Arbor Day, the month of April is often associated with tree planting. Tree planting is best done when trees are dormant (before buds break in the early spring March 1 to May 1 or after leaves fall October 15 to November 30).

Here are 10 simple steps that should lead to a thriving tree in its new location. Please remember to always call 811 in VA to have your underground utilities located prior to planting.

1. **Tree selection and placement.** Consider the site conditions such as space constraints above and below ground, soil conditions, hardiness zone, and human activity. Then focus on selecting the right tree (shape and size) to perform the desired function (shade, ornamental, food for wildlife, etc.). Remember that larger trees typically provide the greatest economic and environmental benefits.
2. **Inspect your tree.** Look for the root flare, the point where the trunk expands at the base of the tree, and remove any excess soil from the top of the root ball prior to planting.
3. **Prepare the hole.** Dig a shallow, dish shaped hole only deep enough to plant the tree but at least 3 times wider than the root ball. Too deep and the tree may settle and be planted below soil level. Soil amendments are not recommended.
4. **Prepare the tree.** Remove the container or cut away wire basket, burlap, and any rope or twine. For container-grown trees, straighten or cleanly prune any circling roots so they radiate out from the trunk to facilitate root growth.
5. **Position the tree.** Place the tree in the hole on firmly packed soil so that the root flare is level with the existing soil line. Straighten the tree in the hole before backfilling by viewing it from several directions.
6. **Fill the hole.** Return the unamended soil back into the hole around the tree. Break up large soil clods and fill by hand around the base of the root ball to stabilize it. As you fill the hole, gently pack the soil down and water it in which will help to eliminate air pockets. There is no need to fertilize at planting time.
7. **Make a dish.** Mound the soil into a small doughnut shape around the tree just outside of the root ball area to aid in watering. This will allow water to infiltrate and remain within the root zone when watering.
8. **Stake only if necessary.** Trees actually become established quicker and develop better form without staking. If needed, only use 1-3 stakes with wide flexible nylon material. Most importantly, make sure to remove the stakes within one year.
9. **Mulch.** Spread mulch around the base of the tree in a 6 foot wide circle with a 2-4 inch layer of an organic mulch such as leaf litter, shredded hardwood mulch, or composted wood chips. Too much mulch can cause problems with oxygen and moisture levels. Keep the mulch at least 1-2 inches from the base of the tree to prevent decay of the living bark.
10. **Follow up care.** Keep the soil moist but not saturated. Until they are established, you will need to water newly planted trees at least once a week during the growing season (spring to fall) unless we receive adequate rainfall (1 inch per week). If it is especially hot and dry, water more often. Think deep, less frequent watering which allows water to go through the entire root zone. If the soil is dry below the mulch, it is time to water.

