



Homeowner Landscape Series: Planting Problems of Trees and Shrubs

Many cultural and pest problems on woody ornamentals can be avoided by selection of high quality plant material. Work with your landscape designer and installer to use plants that are properly adapted to site conditions and fully adapted to extremes of temperature that can be expected. Proper placement in the landscape with adequate room for growth and development will keep plants healthy after they are established. Plants that are weak or damaged when planted may never overcome initial problems and will fail to thrive. Always choose top quality plant material that is suited for the location.



High quality plant material.

Before your landscaper installs the plants, inspect the roots, trunk or stem, and structure of the plant. If the plant is growing in a container, pull it out and inspect the roots. Roots should be white or light tan, succulent, and should not circle more than halfway around the container. Plants with circling roots may develop girdling roots. If you find a circling root, try to spread it out or prune it to the point where the root can be straightened out. Special care is needed when plants are overgrown or held too long in containers because of potential root problems. Most problems with pot-bound plants can be avoided by loosening the roots prior to planting. Roots that are dark brown or black may have been damaged, dried out, rotted, or may not have the ability to generate sufficient new roots when planted, and should be removed or the plant should be discarded.



Plants are kept moist and mulched to protect the roots from drying out.

Don't plant trees and shrubs with cankers, injuries, or cracks in the trunk in your landscape. When inspecting the trunk, be sure the natural trunk flare is visible at soil level. No flare indicates the tree is set too deeply in the root ball. Trees or shrubs that have been planted too deep may never recover. Balled and burlapped plants should not have a loose root ball; fine feeder roots that develop after proper root pruning will hold the soil in the root ball together. When your landscaper is moving plant material, make sure they pick up the plant up by the root ball, not the trunk. Handling the plant by the trunk can result in bark injury or may cause soil to be lost from the root ball. Some trunk damage may never heal and lead to cankers or borer problems.



Protective wrap around trunk prevents damage.

Always make sure that the landscaper or installer selects plants that are free of pests, especially scale insects, and root diseases.

Your landscape designer should choose varieties that are resistant to common insect and disease problems. On conifers, look for normal size needles with good color, and check to ensure that what you are planting is a single plant with a single dominant leader. Nurseries often plant several plants together in a pot to make the foliage look thicker. All but one should be removed at planting time if you cannot locate conifers that are grown as single plants. On deciduous plants, check that the annual growth rate is consistent with what is normal. Choosing top quality plant material ensures your plant will have the best possible chance to thrive in your landscape.



Multiple trees in planting hole.

Site Selection and Preparation:

The installer should loosen the soil. This will help the plant establish faster. Do not dig deeper than the root ball or the plant might sink into the ground too deeply as the soil and plant settle. The sides of the planting hole should slope outwards when planting in heavy soil.

Many new developments have poor soil and based on a soil test, new plantings can benefit from an application of a slow release fertilizer. Compacted soil will benefit from incorporating organic matter into the entire planting area. Do not add soil amendments such as compost or peat moss directly into the planting hole. If amending the soil is not an option, then at least



Use high quality compost to amend poor soil.



Soil compaction from heavy equipment.



Planting site with incorporated compost.



Loosen soil and remove debris before planting.



Check site drainage.



Standing water in planting hole indicates poor drainage.

loosen the soil that may have become compacted due to heavy equipment on the site.

It is ideal to remove all root containment materials from the tree or shrub before planting. These include burlap, cords, root containment bags, wire baskets, etc. However, for large trees



Remove ties, burlap, and wire basket below soil line.



Completely remove root containment bag.



Burlap not removed below soil line.

that may weigh hundreds of pounds removing all of the burlap and wire baskets may not be practical. In these situations cut away some of the burlap and wire basket around the top of the root ball to at least 12 inches below the soil line.

To remove container grown plants from the container, tap gently, set the plant on its side and pull the pot away from the plant. Separate the roots by slicing into the root ball in several places. Gently pull the roots apart, spreading them out. This will prevent girdling roots and encourage new lateral root growth.

Make sure that the installer places the plant in the hole at the proper level. In heavy clay soils, they should plant shrubs with the top of the root ball higher than the existing soil line. They may need to leave eight to ten percent of the root ball above the soil line to ensure that the root ball will have the oxygen needed to sustain the roots. It is important when planting to avoid covering the top of the root ball with more than 1/2 inch of soil. Otherwise, water may be diverted sideways through the native soil and not soak down into the root ball, where it is needed. Keep all soil and mulch away from the stem of the plant. The excess soil that is removed from the planting hole should be graded into the surrounding area or removed from the site.



Remove excess soil and properly grade planting area.



Soil and mulch washed out due to improper grading.



Proper depth of mulch near tree base.



Heavy equipment can damage root balls after installation.



Improper soil removal, over mulching, and poor grading.

Once a tree or shrub has been planted, the soil should be shaped around the stem to create a shallow depression the diameter of the root ball. Fill the depression with water. This permits water to go straight to the root zone rather than run off the surface. Thorough soaking after planting eliminates air pockets around roots. Newly planted trees and shrubs should be watered when the soil below the mulch and in the root ball feels dry. An effective way to maximize growth of trees and shrubs is with a large mulched area. This will reduce competition for nutrients and moisture between young plants and grass. If planted individually, mulch new trees and shrubs out to the drip line. The mulch layer should not exceed 2 to 3 inches in thickness. Keep all mulch away from the stem of the plant.

Care After Planting:

In most situations there is no need to stake a newly planted tree. Research has shown that the natural movement of the trunk by the wind actually stimulates root growth and increases trunk size more quickly near the crown than trees held firm by staking. If the tree does not seem sturdy after planting, or if the site is very windy, staking may be needed for the first season. Allow

enough slack in the supporting wires for some trunk movement. Use pieces of flexible tubing over the wire to prevent bark damage. Stakes can serve as protective devices to keep traffic, lawn mowers, and string trimmers away from the root zone under the tree. **Be sure to remove all stakes and wires after the tree is established.**



Typical wood staking.



Cable ties are a better stabilization method.



Tubing around wire to prevent damage.



Water tank to irrigate plant material or fill gator bags.



Flexible ties to prevent trunk damage.



Stakes and ties not removed after establishment.



Gator bag that was not maintained.



If plant material is not watered properly, stress cankers will develop on trunk.

It is not necessary to prune an ornamental tree before, or after planting unless broken or damaged branches need to be removed. It is also not necessary to balance top growth with roots. Proper planting techniques can help plants to establish quickly and may help plants to better withstand environmental stresses.

Keep newly planted trees watered. **Research has shown that the most important step after planting is regular watering during the first two years for proper establishment.** If using water bags, do not allow all the water to be lost before refilling them. Irrigation needs to be directed to the base of the plant to insure the root ball receives adequate water. The best planting times are spring and fall when air temperatures are cooler and evaporation rates are slower.



If soil dries out root establishment does not occur.

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