

Planting Your Trees

by Deborah Martin, Bell County Master Gardener

Successful planting of trees in your home landscape depends on several factors such as correct handling of nursery stock, condition of tree, site preparation, time of planting and after planting care.

The best time to plant landscape trees is during the fall months of September through December. Planting during this time has distinct advantages. Fall planting follows the heat of summer, and precedes a cool winter season. Trees and shrubs use this to good advantage. The roots grow anytime the soil temperature is 40 degrees or higher, which may occur all winter in Texas. During the winter months, the root systems of the fall-planted specimens develop and become established. When spring arrives, this expanded root system can support and take advantage of the full surge of spring growth and better tolerate the heat and stresses of summer.

Fall is the optimum time to plant balled and burlapped trees and shrubs. Balled and burlapped plants have ample time to recover from transplanting and proliferate roots before spring growth begins. Bare root plants, however, including roses, pecan, and fruit trees should be planted in late winter when they are completely dormant about 30 days prior to expected bud break or average bud break for the variety in this geographical area. Your Extension agent or a good nurseryman can advise you on these average dates.

When buying plants for your landscape, be sure to get healthy, well-grown plants. Always buy from a reputable dealer. Beware of plant bargains. They can easily turn out to be real headaches. A bargain is no good if it dies. The price tag, especially the cheapest one, is not the best guide to quality.

All plants including trees have growing requirements. Think about the plant's needs before you invest. Is it adapted to your area's soil? Will it grow in sun or shade? Does it need a wet or dry location? Is it cold hardy? Some nurseries have this type of information on tags beside the plant. If not, ask a nursery professional or the county Extension agent. Part three of this series will list some trees that are adapted to Central Texas.

'Plan before you plant' is always a good rule of thumb. Whether you are planting a single plant or an entire landscape, plan first, then plant. Good planning is a worthwhile investment of time that will pay off in greater enjoyment of attractive and useful home grounds, and in increasing the value of your home. It's much easier to move plants on paper than to dig them after planting in the wrong place. A plan saves many planting mistakes.

Every plant in the landscape should serve a purpose. Ask yourself if you want a plant for screening, for privacy, or for shade. How large will it be five years from now? Plants, like people, grow up. Remember, that a small one-gallon size plant will look entirely different after a few years of growth in your landscape.

Plant properly for success. Here are a few guidelines on getting the job done right:

Dig a hole large enough in diameter so that the root system has at least six inches of clearance on all sides. The root ball should rest on a solid soil foundation, so don't dig the hole deeper than the ball. If the hole is twice as wide in diameter and no deeper than the root ball the size is adequate. Research has shown that the wider the hole is, the better the plant will grow. Make sure the sides of the hole are not glazed over as this will result in a root bound tree. Break out soil with a shovel to loosen.

Plant the tree or shrub slightly above the level of the surrounding soil, to allow for settling and increased soil drainage. Trees should be planted at least the same depth as they were grown in the nursery. Planting too deep will impair growth.

Carefully place the tree or shrub in the hole. Handle the plant by the root ball, not by the trunk. A broken ball of earth can mean a dead plant. Always remove any container before you plant. Burlap may be left on the ball but all plastic, metal, and strings should be removed to prevent girdling the plant.

Fill the planting hole with water. Add soil. This removes air from roots and ensures viability. Keep adding water and soil until the tree is planted. Backfill the hole, using only the native soil removed from the hole; do not use soil amendments when planting large shrubs and trees. Fill the hole, and firm the soil around the plant. Construct a ring of backfill 2 to 3 inches high at the outer edge of the diameter of the hole to form a water basin. Water thoroughly to settle the soil around the roots and to eliminate any air pockets.

Do not fertilize your tree or shrub after planting. Wait until early in the spring to do this, and even then, go lightly. Heavy applications of fertilizer may burn and injure the root system, and could possibly kill the plant.

Watering has been and remains paramount in transplanting. At the time of transplanting, soak the root ball and surrounding soil. A thorough watering every 7 to 10 days dramatically increases success. More frequent watering may encourage root rot. Remember more trees and shrubs fail from over watering than from under watering, but the roots must not be allowed to dry out while establishing itself in the landscape.

Before calling it a day, add 4 to 6 inches of mulch around the base of newly planted trees and shrubs. This helps to keep down weeds and conserve soil moisture. Use pine bark, compost, grass clippings, or leaves.

Container grown nursery stock can be transplanted any time of the year. Follow the above general directions on site preparation, fertilization and pruning. Always check the roots. They can become distorted or root bound growing in containers for a long period of time. It is suggested that some root pruning be done to ensure new root growth and subsequent strong top growth. Anytime roots are pruned top growth must be pruned to compensate for root loss.