

Shrub Planting and Care

The choice of a shrub, like any other plant, should be dictated by landscaping need and the desired effect. Given the limits of purpose and site, finding a native or even a hardy non-native shrub which will handsomely fulfill every requirement is no problem. Once a choice is made, there remain only a few shrub location and planting tips to be observed.

First, get the shrub from a local reputable, reliable, retail nurseryman. DO NOT transplant from the wild. Not only is this rarely successful, it diminishes our threatened natural plant and animal habitats. A healthy, vigorous looking small shrub is much preferred over a large one, and smaller specimens suffer less transplant shock. With smaller shrubs, chances of survival and rapid growth are very high. They are cheaper, and within a year their size equals those which were initially 2 to 3-times larger.

Second, most native and hardy non-native shrubs do well in most Valley alkaline soils. Poorly drained areas should be avoided or mounded for drainage and the shrubs planted on top of the mound. Raised beds are the best alternative to soils with poor drainage. Also many of our native shrubs will grow on a site where a large portion of the soil near the root area is covered by blacktop or paving. Make sure the plant has plenty of growing space and leave 18 to 24 inches of space between the shrubs and the house foundation or edge of driveways or pathways, so the shrub has plenty of room for natural growth.

Planting Shrubs

When to plant

The best times to plant in the Lower Rio Grande Valley are late-autumn (to allow for root establishment and dormancy before any freeze) and mid-February after danger of freezing has passed. Planting during the hotter months can be done but requires much more water, care and maintenance, and is equally more stressful on the plant and you, than during the cooler late-autumn through early-spring months. For cold hardy shrubs fall is the best time.

Preparing the Site

A hole should be dug 6 inches wider than the diameter of, and just deep enough to hold, the full root system. In very poor soils it should be even wider. As the hole is dug, the soil from the top 4 to 6 inches, which is richer, should be kept separated from the subsoil. Discard the subsoil and replace with the top soil or improve the topsoil by mixing at least one part topsoil to one part moist peatmoss or excess media from the pot in which the shrub was growing.

Setting the shrub

The depth of the top of the root system should **NOT** be lower than the top of the hole. It usually kills the shrub when planted too deep. Remove the shrub from container. If roots are so numerous they are encircling the root ball, cut the root

ball to a depth of 2 inches with a sharp knife vertically, from the top to the bottom, to encourage the roots to grow outward. After setting the shrub in the hole, soil should be added gradually working the first lot in firmly at the base of the root ball, then filling the hole with more soil. The shrub may be raised and lowered during the filling process to eliminate air pockets thus bringing the roots in closer contact with the soil. When filled, press firmly with the palms of your hands.

Watering

The soil around the shrub must be watered thoroughly after the plant is set in place. A ring of soil at the perimeter of the filled hole, 4 inches high, should be made for holding water. The frequency of watering depends on the type of soil, the size of the shrub and the amount of rainfall. The soil ball around a newly planted shrub can dry out rapidly and Valley showers cannot be depended upon to supply sufficient moisture during the critical first year of growth. During mid-spring, summer and mid-fall months, water all newly planted shrubs for the first 4 to 6 weeks as often as 3 times a week by filling to the top of the soil ring. During the rest of the year a weekly soaking over a 4-week period should be sufficient. Watering every two weeks thereafter for the first year, should provide ample moisture for your shrub to survive and grow. Then stand back and let nature do the watering. A three inch layer of mulch should be added to reduce moisture loss and weed growth. But remember to keep the mulch away from the base of the shrub to prevent disease and insect damage.

(Source: Native Shrubs of the Lower Rio Grande Valley, Texas, Landscape Uses and Identification, Native Plant Project, P.O. Box 1433 Edinburg, TX 78540).

Article written by the Cameron County Horticulture Education Committee.
Questions or Comments write to: Cameron County Master Gardeners
Association, 1390 W. Expressway 83, San Benito, TX 78586-3869.
Phone: 956-361-8236 or Fax: 956-361-8289 or email:
cameroncountymastergardeners@gmail.com