

TREE PLANTING & WATERING for the Rio Grande Valley

Site Selection and When to Plant

Selecting the right planting spot reduces the need for maintenance. Remember to allow for growth. Before buying, ask your local nursery professional what the mature size of a tree will be. Do not plant tall growth trees under utility wires, house eaves, or close enough to buckle pavement. Also do not plant wide-spreading trees, like Live Oaks or Rio Grande Ash, close to your house, as branches hanging over your roof can cause roof damage and can provide a bridge for termite infestation.

The best times to plant trees in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, in most years, are late autumn i.e. mid-October to mid-December (to allow for root establishment and dormancy before any freeze) and late winter to early spring i.e. mid-February on, (after the danger of freezing has passed). Planting during the hotter months is OK but requires more water even for our Valley native trees (*see section, in this article, on Watering*).

• Planting Hole Preparation

The hole should be dug sufficiently deep and wide enough to hold the full root system. In very poor soils, such as those which are poorly drained near resacas, the hole should be at least a foot wider. As you dig the hole, the top 4 to 6 inches of soil which is usually richer, having more organic matter, should be kept separate from the lower subsoil. The best technique for separating soil is to lay down a canvas or heavy plastic sheet large enough hold all the dug out soil. This sheet will provide a surface to mix soils and protects your grass. Improve your subsoil by mixing 1 to 1 subsoil to moist peatmoss or excess media from the pot in which the tree was growing, or discard the subsoil and replace with fresh top soil.

• Planting the Tree

While the tree is still in its container place the tree in the hole. The top of the soil in the pot should **NOT** be lower or higher than the top of the hole. If the tree is planted too deep, soil around the trunk will soften the bark allowing for disease and insects to invade which will kill the tree. Remove the tree from container, check the roots, they should be numerous and whitish in color. If the roots are so numerous that they circle the ball of soil, cut the roots and root ball to a depth of 2 inches with a sharp knife up the entire side of the ball, on opposite sides. This encourages roots to grow outward into the adjacent soil. If you do not cut the roots, they will continue to grow in a circle and the tree will grow very slowly. If planting a tree with burlap covering the root ball, place tree in the hole with the root ball level with the top of the hole. Loosen the burlap and any strings or wires from the trunk, fold back uncovering the top of the soil ball. It is very important that all the burlap be buried as exposed burlap will serve as a wick, drying out the roots even when regularly watered. After setting the tree in the hole, soil should be added gradually working the first shovel full of soil in firmly at the base

of the root ball, then filling the hole with more soil. The tree may be raised and lowered during the filling process to eliminate air pockets and to bring the roots in close contact with the soil. When filled, tamp the entire area lightly with feet. The the soil level, from the trunk out to the lawn should be flat and even with the lawn. **Do not ever mound soil on to the trunk of any tree**, soil around the trunk will soften the bark allowing for disease and insects to invade which will eventually cause the tree to die.

- **Watering**

The soil around the tree must be watered thoroughly after the tree is set in place. A ring of soil on the perimeter of the filled hole, 4 inches high, should be made for holding water. The soil ball around the newly planted tree can dry out rapidly and Valley showers cannot be depended upon to supply sufficient moisture. During mid-spring, summer and mid-fall months water newly planted trees for the first 4 to 6 weeks as often as 3 times a week by filling to the top of the soil ring. Then water weekly for a month. Then every two weeks thereafter for the first year. This should provide ample moisture for your tree to survive. After one year let nature do the watering. Remember your lawn irrigation system does not supply enough water. Also, if you do not follow this watering schedule for the first year, your tree may not die but it will be slowed in its growth by as much as 50%.

- **Supporting**

Newly planted trees need some artificial support to prevent excessive swaying from the Valley's strong winds which will disturb and break up the root system. For trees up to 20 feet, 1 or 2 strong stakes, 6 to 8 feet long should be driven 2 feet into the ground, 6 inches out from the watering ring. Wide cloth tape, wound around the trunk and then nailed to the stake will support the tree. Commercial tree braces are available. **DO NOT** use bare wire or string as these will cut into the bark and may kill the tree or allow for disease and insects to enter. If string and wire are to be used, place a protective shield such as a piece of garden hose, between the trunk and the wire or string to prevent cutting into the bark. Also allow a little slack in the wire, string or tree brace so that the tree can move slightly in the wind. Tree movement develops timber or strength so the tree can eventually stand on its own. After a year remove all the support materials. (Information source: Native Trees 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