WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY
SPOKANE COUNTY EXTENSION
SPOKANE COUNTY

222 N Havana
Spokane WA 99202
(509) 477-2181
http://spokane-county.wsu.edu/spokane/eastside/
mastergardener@spokanecounty.org

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PLANTING TREES AND SHRUBS

Improper planting has probably caused the demise of more landscape plants than diseases, insects or other problems. Planting and establishing trees is all about managing air and moisture in the soil. The three most common causes of poor plant establishment are:

1) Planting too deep
2) Over watering
3) Under watering

In the past it was recommended to add peat, manure, compost or other organic material to the planting holes of trees and shrubs, but recent research has shown that problems result from this practice.

Adding rich organic material to a planting hole creates a soil and root environment very different from the native, unamended soil in a yard. The interface between the two soil types creates a barrier that water and new growing roots won't cross. The result may be a planting hole that stays too wet and roots that stay within the original planting hole, becoming gnarled and stunted. The tree and shrub itself grows slowly, if at all, and may eventually die.

Below are tips on the proper planting of newly purchased trees and shrubs:

Look up when choosing a planting site. Check for overhead wires and security lights on buildings that can interfere with proper development.

Dig a shallow planting hole. The depth of the hole should not be deeper than the height of the root system. The width should be at least one and a half times the diameter of the root ball. Loosen the soil if it is compacted.

A swelling called the ‘trunk’ or ‘root’ flare is the area where the topmost roots join the trunk. The root flare (if visible) should be slightly above the surface of the soil when the tree is placed in the planting hole. Planting at the appropriate height will help assure the tree's success. If you can't see the trunk flare in a container-grown plant, remove soil from around the trunk until it becomes visible. If the tree sets too deep in the hole, remove it and firmly pack soil in the bottom of the hole. Soil amendments are not recommended. Cut or loosen roots that are kinked or that circle the top of the ball.

Add native soil around the roots. Do not compress the soil by stomping on it. Add several gallons of water that will infiltrate the soil and eliminate large air pockets. If you want to form a watering berm around the tree, you can use mulch that it is less than four inches tall. This type of berm is beneficial if the tree will be watered with a hose.

When you purchase a new tree to plant it will be either Bare Root, (B&B) Balled and Burlapped or Container Grown.

Bare root plants are mostly deciduous plants that have been dug without any attached soil while dormant in the winter. Roots must be kept moist until planting.

Dig the hole twice the width of the root system and deep enough that the junction of roots and trunk is at ground level. Spread the roots out so that none are bent or circling.

Backfill the planting hole with the soil that was dug out. Don't add fertilizer or organic matter. Water it immediately to settle the soil and force out air pockets. Keep the ground moist, not wet, to encourage good root development. Bare root trees are purchased early in the spring and planted before their buds open.

Balled and burlapped plants are dug from nurseries with soil around their roots and wrapped with either biodegradable natural burlap or non-biodegradable synthetic material. Keep this wrapped rootball moist.

Dig the planting hole twice the diameter of the rootball and deep enough so that the tip of the rootball is even with or an inch or two higher than ground level.

After the plant is in the hole, remove all strings or twine around the wrap. Cut away the burlap as far down into the planting hole as possible before backfilling with the native soil. Always remove non-biodegradable synthetic material.

If the soil around the root ball is different from the soil into which it is being planted, gently fork some of the soil away from the root system to expose surface roots before backfilling with native soil. Roots in contact with native soil will grow into that soil.

Container grown plants pose special problems. They are usually grown in a highly organic "soil-less" medium. By the time of purchase, plant roots often have grown out to the edge of the container and may even be circling around the pot. If roots are circling, make several vertical slices into the root clump to cut the circling roots. Then spread apart the root clump as much as possible.

As with balled and burlapped plants, set the plant into the planting hole so that the top of the root mass is at or slightly above the ground level. Backfill with native soil, making sure roots remain spread out in the hole while filling it in.

Limit pruning at planting time to removal of dead or damaged branches, removal of rubbing or crossed-over branches, and to shaping the plant. It is not necessary to remove top growth at planting time.

Compiled by Tonie Fitzgerald. For more information, contact Master Gardeners at (509) 477-2181.
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