

Planting Trees and Shrubs during the Dormant Season

This is the second in a 3-part series on tree planning, planting and pruning. In this article, we will address the steps involved with the planting process, more specifically planting during the dormant season. The benefit for fall planting is trees are entering dormancy and don't make new leaves. As a result, the plant's energy is directed toward growing a robust root system in preparation for next year's growing season. Most often, the soil provides ample warmth for the roots to grow well throughout winter. Trees and shrubs will need about a month in order to establish their roots before a heavy freeze. So, go ahead and plant them anytime the ground is workable and follow these steps to ensure success of your late-season plantings.

- 1) **Make certain the space fits:** Measure the area to ensure the tree doesn't outgrow the space at maturity, which generally occurs 10-15 years later.
- 2) **Use native soil as backfill and avoid stimulating growth:** Don't fertilize or overly amend the soil. Simply add a little compost and bone meal but don't fertilize until spring. Studies by OSU, by Dr. Carl Whitcomb ("Know it and Grow it" and other books) and Joe Schultz (owner of Southwood Landscape and Nursery) show that soil amendments, when planting trees, may actually hamper maximum growth.
- 3) **Make certain not to disturb the tree:** Avoid heavy pruning and be very gentle with the roots when planting. Otherwise, it won't have time to recover from the damage and it's going to be stressed enough as it is.
- 4) **Keep the tree watered:** The worst part of cold damage is caused by desiccation, or drying out. Keep new tree watered every week or two until the ground freezes. This is especially important right before a heavy freeze.
- 5) **Stake the tree if necessary:** Some studies show that trees develop stronger trunks and root systems if they are staked. This is especially true on a windy site, and it helps to keep the lawn mower away. However, do remove the stake after the second year of planting. If left any longer, it may actually hurt or damage the tree.

2. **Apply mulch:** Add mulch to keep newly planted shrubs insulated, making certain not to place more than four (4) inches of mulch around your tree and always avoid the volcano style of mulching. Add extra protection for cold sensitive trees by wrapping or banking the plants with burlap or leaves on cold nights, but make certain to uncover it in the morning.
3. **Store trees in a sheltered spot:** If the ground is frozen and unworkable, place your trees in a protected spot with a southern exposure. Keep them insulated with leaves or mulch and make certain to water regularly. Once the weather breaks, prune any damaged branches and feed with a balanced organic fertilizer.

OSU performed a study comparing a variety of 2-year-old trees, planted in spring and fall. They found trees planted in the fall/early winter had up to 50 percent larger root balls and trunk thickness when compared with spring-planted trees after one growing season. So, go ahead and plant trees, making certain they're the correct variety and will withstand off-season planting. Next month, we'll tackle the pruning of trees.



