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The Hidden Cost of Improper Tree Planting: Why Roots Matter More Than You Think



One of the most common — and preventable — reasons trees struggle or fail is improper planting. In particular, girdling roots are a widespread issue I see again and again, and they often begin long before a tree ever reaches its permanent home.

Girdling roots (pictured above) are roots that grow in a circular pattern around the trunk of a tree, gradually restricting the flow of water and nutrients through the vascular system — much like a tourniquet. Over time, this can lead to canopy dieback, stunted growth, and ultimately, the decline or death of the tree. Many trees arrive from nurseries already predisposed to this problem due to container growing, where roots circle tightly instead of spreading outward.

Proper planting makes all the difference. When a tree is planted, the person installing it must take the time to break up circling roots, pull them outward, and orient them radially away from the trunk. Just as important is exposing the root flare—the point where the trunk widens into roots. The root flare plays a critical role in a tree's ability to exchange gases and function properly. When it's buried too deeply under soil or mulch, the tree becomes stressed and struggles to thrive.

Unfortunately, improper planting is incredibly common. I'm frequently called to properties to diagnose tree health issues, only to find trees planted too deeply, burlap still tied around the root ball, or wire cages left intact. Trees already face enough stressors — drought, pests, disease, poor soil, lack of sunlight — and planting mistakes compound those challenges from day one.

In some cases, treatment is possible. Root excavation using tools like compressed air (often called air spading) allows us to safely remove soil around the base of a tree, expose problem roots, and selectively prune girdling roots. This process also reduces soil compaction and improves the effectiveness of soil injections and other plant health treatments.

Education is a major focus of my work. Through my involvement with the Rhode Island Tree Council, I've been part of initiatives teaching proper planting techniques in communities with low tree canopy coverage. The goal is simple but powerful: give people the knowledge to plant trees correctly so they can thrive for decades.

Looking ahead, one of my biggest priorities is expanding thoughtful, large-scale planting projects. I want Arboreal Solutions to be known as the team that plants the right tree in the right place — the right way. That includes considering mature tree size, proximity to structures and power lines, and long-term maintenance. Tools like plant growth regulators can also play a role in managing growth responsibly when trees are placed in challenging environments.

When trees are planted correctly, we dramatically reduce stress, extend their lifespan, and protect the investment homeowners and communities are making. Proper planting isn't just a best practice — it's the foundation of tree health.