

Proper Tree Planting

Across Oklahoma, opportunities abound to plant flowering trees, fruit trees and some trees that will one day reach heights well beyond thirty feet. The proper time to plant a tree in our zone is from October to March, essentially from fall to early spring. During that time, a newly planted tree has an opportunity to attach itself to the soil, benefit from the organic matter and countless organisms that together support its life. Plant-ready trees come in either a container or what is referred to as ball and burlap (B&B). The following are general instructions to ensure proper planting and thus providing the tree with a strong chance for success.

Proper Planting for Ball and Burlap

Once a suitable location is selected, dig a saucer-shaped hole that is 2-3 times the size of the diameter and as deep as the root ball. These dimensions will provide the proper planting space and encourage root growth. Make certain to measure the depth so the root collar is at or just above ground level.

Place the tree in the center of the hole. If you must move the tree after it is set in the hole, handle it by the root ball being careful as to not break the soil around the root ball apart. As you continue to position the tree, check the depth. If the root collar is below ground level place some soil underneath the root ball to elevate it to just above ground level.

After placing the tree in position, use a wire cutter to remove wires and strings. Remove what burlap is possible without disturbing the root ball. Step a few feet away from the tree to make certain it is straight before firmly packing the soil around the root ball with backfill. Do not add any amendments to the native soil before backfilling.

Berm the soil at the holes edge to contain water. Once the water soaks in, spread 2-4 inches of loose mulch around the tree, making certain to keep it a minimum of four inches away from the trunk.

In the weeks following your planting, keep the soil and mulch moist (but not soggy) and water at the drip line. Trees need at least one inch of water per week by irrigation or rainfall.

Make certain to remove all tags and labels from the tree and prune only broken or dead branches.

Proper Planting for Trees in Containers

Remove the tree from the container and identify the trunk flare. It is the area where the trunk expands at the base of the tree. This area needs to be level with, or slightly above, the soil grade - never below.

Dig a shallow, broad planting hole 2 to 3 times wider than the root ball, but only as deep as the root ball. Digging a broad planting pit breaks up the surrounding soil and provides newly emerging tree roots ample room to expand.

Place the tree at the proper height taking care to dig the hole to the proper depth. The majority of a tree's roots develop in the top 12 inches of soil. Planting trees too deep is a major cause of loss during the first three years.

Straighten the tree in the hole. Before completely backfilling, look at the tree from several directions to confirm it is straight.

Fill the hole gently, but firmly. Pack soil around the base of the root ball to stabilize it. If necessary, stake the tree, especially if in a windy location, on a slope, or if it comes as a bare root plant. Studies have shown that trees grow much faster if they are not staked at the time of planting. Always remove the support and ties after the first year.

Mulch the base of the tree. This will help to hold moisture, to moderate soil temperature extremes, and to reduce grass and weed competition. Use no more than 2-4 inches of loose mulch. Keep the soil moist.

For follow-up care, water trees at least once a week and more frequently during hot, windy weather. When the soil is dry below the surface of the mulch, it is time to water. Trees need supplemental water at all seasons for the first three years.

Additional follow-up care for all trees may include minor pruning of branches damaged during the planting process. Prune carefully after planting and avoid unnecessary corrective pruning until a full season of growth in the new location has occurred.