

A Comprehensive Guide to Trees

Selection, Planting and Maintenance



Trees are foundational to Oklahoma landscapes—offering structure, seasonal beauty, and resilience. By making informed choices in selection, planting, care, maintenance, disease monitoring, and choosing Oklahoma Proven varieties, gardeners can ensure landscapes that thrive even through fall and winter. This guide leverages Oklahoma State University Extension resources to support you every step of the way! Just click the links available in each topic (**look for the arrow ↗**), or at the end of the article in the Resources section.

Tree Plant Types and Planting Times ↗

Selecting the right tree begins with understanding both plant types suited to Oklahoma conditions and the optimal planting times to give them the strongest start.

Plant Types

OSU Extension emphasizes choosing species adapted to your site's soil, climate, and environmental conditions rather than defaulting to nursery proximity. For example, some trees—like pin oak—may struggle with chlorosis in alkaline soils, while others—such as sweetgum—deal better in poorly drained clay areas despite their own sensitivities. Your species choice should consider soil pH, drainage, drought tolerance, and long-term site goals.

Planting Times

Timing matters. The best time to plant most trees and shrubs in Oklahoma is fall and early spring:

Early fall is ideal for container-grown and balled-and-burlapped stock.

Mid-February through early April suits bare-root trees, which are best planted while still dormant.

Planting during these periods allows roots to establish without battling summer heat or winter stress. Containerized trees, if properly planted and watered, may even be installed outside these windows—though fall remains the safest bet.

Tree Planting ↗

To ensure long-term success:

Dig wide, not deep: The hole should be 2–3 times the diameter of the root ball, but only as deep as the root ball itself.

Adjust for soil type: In clay soils typical of Oklahoma, plant trees 1–2 inches above grade to promote drainage; in sandy soils, plant at original grade.

Backfill with native soil: Avoid adding amendments; fill to the top of the root ball so roots are not exposed.

Avoid using gravel or crushed stone at the bottom—it impedes water movement.

These steps help prevent root rot and ensure proper root development.

Tree Care ↗

Mulching Best Practices ↗

Mulching plays a vital role in protecting trees—especially newly planted ones—during fall and winter:

Mulch Depth and Diameter: Apply organic mulch 2–4 inches deep, covering a circle 4–6 feet in diameter around the tree, keeping mulch 2–4 inches away from the trunk to avoid moisture buildup and rodent damage.

The benefits of proper mulching:

Creates a weed-and-turf-free zone, reducing competition for water and nutrients.

Regulates soil temperature and moisture, buffering roots against heat and cold.

When using organic mulch materials (e.g., leaf mold, compost, bark, straw), benefits extend into improving soil organic matter, structure, and nutrient content—especially in Oklahoma’s mineral-rich, organic-poor soils.

Avoid These Common Mulching Mistakes:

Never use plastic under mulch—it restricts soil gas exchange and promotes root issues.

Do not mound mulch against the trunk; this can harbor disease, pests, and rodents, particularly in winter.

Do not use rock or limestone chat—they transfer heat to roots or alter soil chemistry in harmful ways.

Additional Care Practices

Watering: Provide a thorough watering at planting. Afterward, young trees generally need the equivalent of 1 inch of rain per week, with more frequent watering needed in hot, dry, or windy conditions.

Pruning : At planting, avoid excessive pruning. Only remove damaged or crossing branches; preserve lower limbs early on to protect against sunscald.

Staking: Only stake when necessary (e.g., in windy areas or for top-heavy trees). Use broad, flexible materials and remove stakes after the first growing season to encourage natural trunk strengthening.

Tree Maintenance ↗

Fertilization ↗: Only apply fertilizer when growth is poor or soil tests indicate nutrient deficiencies. Use in early spring or late fall and avoid overapplication to prevent weak, pest-prone growth.

Pruning: Late winter is the best time. Remove dead or crossing branches, but avoid topping.

Disease Identification

Monitoring tree health is essential to prevent the spread of disease and maintain long-term vigor. Here are the key practices:

Regular Inspections: Frequently assess trees for signs of stress or illness. Look for sparse foliage, yellowing or wilting leaves, dead branches, or abnormal leaf drop. Consistent monitoring helps detect problems early.

Identify Symptoms and Patterns: Recognize specific disease symptoms. Fungal infections may cause discoloration or wilting, while insect damage can appear as holes or chewed leaves. Noting which parts of the tree are affected helps with diagnosis. Use the [OSU Digital Diagnostic Resource](#) ↗ for help, or contact a [certified arborist](#) ↗.

Evaluate Environmental Factors: Environmental conditions like drought, flooding, poor drainage, and light levels impact tree health. Trees stressed by weather extremes are more vulnerable to disease and pests.

Use Sample Testing: When disease is suspected, send samples of affected plant material to the [Plant Disease and Insect Diagnostics Lab](#) ↗.

Keep Records: Document your observations, treatments applied, and how symptoms change over time. This historical record aids in identifying recurring issues and improving disease management.

Monitor for Insects: Check leaves and stems regularly for insect activity. Not all infestations require action, but severe or recurring ones may need treatment.

For expert support and diagnostics tailored to Oklahoma conditions, consult your [Oklahoma State University Extension Office](#) ↗.

Oklahoma Proven Trees: Fall and Winter Interest ↗

Deciduous Trees with Seasonal Flair ↗:

Caddo Sugar Maple (*Acer saccharum* ‘Caddo’) – Heat- and drought-tolerant with brilliant golden-orange fall foliage.

Shumard Oak (*Quercus shumardii*) – Strong structure with deep red fall color; wind and ice resistant.

Bald Cypress (*Taxodium distichum*) – Offers russet fall foliage and graceful winter form.

Evergreen Trees for Year-Round Interest ↗:

Arizona Cypress (*Cupressus arizonica*) – Silver-green, drought-tolerant, and attractive winter foliage.

Limber Pine (*Pinus flexilis* ‘Vanderwolf’s Pyramid’) – Provides dense evergreen cover, beautiful silvery blue color and winter habitat for birds.

Oklahoma Proven selections excel at delivering fall color, winter form, and resilience in the state’s challenging climate.

Think before you plant!

Fall and winter in Oklahoma landscapes depend on thoughtful tree selection aligned with soil and climate, timely planting, and vigilant care—especially mulching. Avoiding common pitfalls, monitoring for disease, and choosing robust, Proven selections will yield beauty and ecological benefit through the dormant season and beyond. For more in-depth advice and regional guidance, consult your [Oklahoma State University Extension Office ↗](#).

Resources

[Tulsa Master Gardeners: Trees for Tulsa](#)

[Oklahoma State University: Oklahoma Proven Tree Selections](#)

[Oklahoma State University Fact Sheet HLA-6456: Selecting Deciduous Trees for Oklahoma](#)

[Oklahoma State University Fact Sheet HLA-6463: Selecting Evergreen Trees](#)

[Oklahoma State University Fact Sheet HLA-6414: Planting Trees and Shrubs](#)

[ISA: Find an Arborist](#)

[Oklahoma State University Fact Sheet EPP-7634: Anthracnose and Other Common Leaf Diseases of Deciduous Shade Trees](#)

[Oklahoma State University Fact Sheet L-440: Tree Planting Guide](#)

[Oklahoma State University Fact Sheet HLA-6412: Fertilizing Shade and Ornamental Trees and Shrubs](#)

[Oklahoma State University Fact Sheet HLA-6409: Pruning Ornamental Trees, Shrubs and Vines](#)

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