

David G. Hallauer
District Extension Agent
Crops & Soils/Horticulture

Tree Planting Rules

It goes without saying that we can't expect every landscape planting to survive. Even so, putting time and effort in to things like a tree planting – only to see it fail! – is a little deflating! To help you avoid potential frustration, consider these best management tips as you prepare. The best way to frustrate yourself long term is to select the wrong tree! Disease pressure, insect problems and environmental challenges can eventually result in frustration because of the wrong tree in the wrong place. Some species produce very nice fruit – that are a nuisance if they are over a sidewalk! Consider mature size and shape, disease tendencies, and environmental adaptability of species to determine which is best for you. See <http://hnr.k-state.edu/extension/info-center/recommended-plants/index.html> or ask a local nurseryman for suggestions for trees adapted to your area.

Before planting, make sure the tree is well-watered and in a shady location. Only move by lifting the root ball or pot and not by the trunk. Remove all wires/labels/cords/etc.... tied to the plant that could cause girdling.

Make sure your hole is deep enough so that the tree sits slightly above nursery level. The root flare (point where trunk and roots meet) should be visible. If it isn't, remove enough soil or media so that it is. Be sure to plant the tree on solid ground, not on fill dirt. Hole width is very important! Make it three times the width of the root ball, loosening the soil outside the hole so it is five times the diameter of the root ball to allow the tree to spread its roots faster.

Do NOT leave containers on the root ball! Cut away plastic and peat pots. Roll burlap and wire baskets back into the hole, cutting as much of the excess away as possible (remove wire baskets without disturbing the root ball if you can!). If roots have been circling around in the container, cut them and spread out so they do not continue growing that way inside the hole, girdling roots later in the tree's life.

Backfill with the same soil you removed, avoiding amendments that may do more harm than good (if adding organic matter, mix thoroughly with the soil!!). Soil should be devoid of clumps or clods and put back in loose. Add water as you fill to ensure good root to soil contact and prevent air pockets. There is no need to fertilize at planting. Be careful to avoid situations that may create a 'bowl' effect to the planting hole that will hold water, drowning the tree.

Remove rubbing or damaged branches and leave the rest! Leaf buds release hormones that encourages root growth so cutting off limbs removes leaf buds and reduces root mass.

Water the tree thoroughly then once a week for the first season if moisture is lacking. Mulch the tree to a two to four inch depth (and two to three times the diameter of the root ball) to help with moisture conservation, as well as temperature moderation and weed competition.

Stake if necessary (i.e., large trees in windy locations), but staked trees tend to grow slower than those not staked. Movement helps the trunk to become strong. Staking should be designed to limit movement of the root ball rather than immobilize the trunk.