

The Most Important 10 Minutes in a Tree's Life

Fall is the perfect time to plant the tree you've been thinking about. Weather conditions are cooler and moister which helps the tree establish roots in the new location. Remember, tree roots keep growing until the soil freezes. In the spring the tree will be well on its way to becoming an established part of your yard.

First, do your homework. Choose a tree that flourishes in your planting zone, favors the type of soil in your yard, and will grow to a size that is appropriate for the area. Select a location for the tree at least eighteen inches away from any utilities. Be sure to call Diggers Hotline before you dig so they can mark any utilities buried in the area - you may want to be around to enjoy your tree for years to come.

Now it's time to plant the tree. Start by digging a hole nice and wide, three times the diameter of the root ball, so the new roots do not have to push through hard compacted soil. When this is finished, take the wire cage, twine, and any burlap off the tree so that those roots don't have to fight through it.

Place the tree in the hole ensuring the root ball is even with the top of the soil. Then start filling the hole making sure there are no air pockets in the soil to allow the roots to dry out. You can use a hose to water the soil as you put it in to help it settle. During this entire process make sure the tree stays straight in the hole.

When you are satisfied the soil is level with the yard you stake the tree. This is done if it is a windy part of the yard and it will need help until the root system expands. In a year you will take the stakes out so the tree can sway in the wind. This will make a stronger trunk and a better root system.

Finally, you mulch the tree right out to the edge of the planting hole. Mulch it three to four inches deep except right next to the trunk where you keep it at only one inch deep. The trunk needs to dry out so disease cannot cause problems.

You step back and admire the great job you've done and can't wait to watch the tree grow.

Fifteen years pass and the tree has been doing great. Your family can finally sit in its shade on a hot summer afternoon. But then as you look up you notice the leaves are smaller, the canopy thinner, and some dead branches have appeared.

You know something is wrong but you can't find any bugs or diseases, so you call a certified arborist to come out and hopefully help the tree.

As the arborist walks around the tree he notices that it does not have a root flare but goes straight into the ground like a telephone pole. At that moment he knows what is causing the problem. He tells you the tree has girdling roots. Girdling roots are caused by a tree being planted too deep and the roots start to grow up and around the trunk of the tree. After many years the trunk and the roots get large enough that they come into contact with each other. Root tissue cannot graft to trunk tissue so the roots start to strangle the tree.

The arborist tells you that you can try to save the tree by digging down and cutting off the girdling roots. This is time consuming and expensive but it is the only chance the tree has to survive.

You tell the arborist he must be wrong because you planted the tree at the top of the root ball.

The arborist then explains that the “top” of the root ball may not be where to plant the tree. Girdling roots can be prevented at the time of planting. After you take off the wire and burlap dig down into the top of the root ball until you find where the roots go out away from the trunk; this could be six to nine inches down. You need to find the root flare and plant at that level. Roots cannot wrap around the trunk because it is above ground. The whole process shouldn't take more than an extra ten minutes.

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