

Planting Trees in the Fall

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

As the crisp cool nights of fall start the leaf color change and drop, many people are excitedly looking forward to wrapping up the fall lawn and garden season. Yet fall is a great time for planting many trees and shrubs.

Fall is an excellent time for planting trees and shrubs for several reasons. Spring soils are cold and may be wet. That combination leads to slow root growth, often due to low oxygen levels in the soil. But in the fall, soils are often drier and warmer. Even though plants are going dormant, at least in the above ground portions, the roots are still actively growing. Getting trees planted now allows the roots to settle in and grow before the soils cool and the root systems go dormant. Additionally, once the soils do warm up in the spring, the root system is in place and growing so you will have less transplant shock.

Several things to keep in mind if you are planting the tree yourself. If it is a ball and burlap tree, please remove all the wrapping from the root ball. The old theory was that these things rotted quickly, but in our climates, this just isn't the case. Remove the burlap, remove the twine remove the wire cage if there is one. All of these things can inhibit outward root growth. Often the twine is not biodegradable and can start to strangle the tree's growth. Make sure that the crown of the plant is at ground level. Planting it deeper can inhibit proper root development. If the plant is in a container check to make sure that there aren't circling roots. If there are, slice through them with a knife or cut them with hand pruners. Again, make sure the crown of the plant is at ground level, not deeper.

While there are root stimulators and planting fertilizers, I like to be very cautious with any fertilizer in the root zone. If you do use something, make sure it is high phosphorus and low nitrogen and go sparingly. Nitrogen fertilizers are salt based and can burn tender young roots. Wait a year or two after planting before you start fertilizing very much at all.

Once you get the plant in the ground, carefully backfill with soil and firm it up, but don't pack it. Water well to settle the soil and apply an organic mulch, such as wood chips, around the base of the tree to moderate temperature and control weed growth. Mulch around the base of a tree should be like a doughnut, not quite touching the trunk of the tree. Mounding up mulch, like a volcano, against the trunk of the tree is just inviting problems. If your new plant is deciduous (losing it's leaves in the winter) then just one watering is probably all you need to do. If you are planting an evergreen, then water monthly if we don't receive rain or snow. Evergreens will carry on photosynthesis, on warm days in the fall and winter, which uses up water.

Because newly planted trees are at risk of winter sunscald I encourage wrapping the trunk of the tree with tree wrap. Carefully apply this heavy paper wrap around the tree from the ground up to the first branch. It is important to remove this in late March to avoid damage to the tree. Staking is probably overdone on most normal size trees. If large trees are staked, the staking needs to allow some movement of the tree and then removed after one year.

While most of our woody trees and shrubs can be planted in fall, there are a few species that do not show good fall root growth and should not be fall planted. Most notably this includes redbud and birches. Other species to not plant in the fall are beech, tulip poplar, willow, scarlet and black oak, willows and dogwood.