



## How to Plant a Tree

While planting each of these different types (balled and burlapped, and container grown) of trees differs in the details, all trees eventually end up in a hole. But not any old hole will do.

**The most common mistake when planting a tree is digging a hole which is both too deep and too narrow.** As a general rule, trees should be transplanted no deeper than the soil in which they were originally grown. Too deep and the roots don't have access to sufficient oxygen to ensure proper growth. Trees planted too deeply tend to go into decline in a few years. Measure the height of your root ball carefully, and dig the hole at that same depth, so that the root ball will sit on firm ground (not soft, backfilled soil). Too narrow and the root structure can't expand sufficiently to nourish and properly anchor the tree, and you may have trouble maneuvering the root ball into the position you want.

The width of the hole should be 2 to 3 times the diameter of the root ball or container or the spread of the roots in the case of bare root trees. This will provide the tree with enough worked earth for its root structure to establish itself. The root flare at the bottom of the trunk should be noticeable above ground. Avoid the "telephone pole" look, where the trunk comes out of the ground as straight as a telephone pole.

When digging in poorly drained clay soil, it is important to avoid 'glazing'. Glazing occurs when the sides and bottom of a hole become smoothed forming a barrier through which water has difficulty passing. To break up the glaze, use a fork to work the bottom and drag the points along the sides of the completed hole. If your soil seems to be especially heavy clay, digging the hole so that the center bottom of the hole is slightly higher than the surrounding area will allow water to disperse, reducing the possibility of water pooling in the planting zone.

► **Planting Balled and Burlapped Trees.** Balled and burlapped (B & B) trees, although best planted as soon as possible, can be stored for some time after purchase as long as the ball is kept moist and the tree stored in a shady area. **B & B trees should always be lifted by the ball, never by the trunk.** The burlap surrounding the ball of earth and roots should either be cut away completely (mandatory, in the case of synthetic or plastic burlap) or at least pulled back and cut off from the top third of the ball (in the case of natural burlap). Any string or twine should also be removed. Toss a little organic fertilizer in the bottom of the hole. Backfill with the same soil that you removed when you dug the hole. If you feel the need to amend the soil, mix in a little compost, but not too much. You don't want the soil in the hole to be substantially different than the surrounding soil, or else your tree site may be a spot that either dries out faster than the surrounding soil or stays too wet. Backfill soil is then placed in the hole surrounding the tree just to the height of the ball or slightly lower to allow for some settling. Toss in some more organic fertilizer as you backfill. Firm in the backfill soil with your heel to hold the tree in place. Some people like to backfill halfway, water that portion in, and then finish backfilling. Keep an eye on the tree during the first few weeks to make sure that it stays straight. If a wind causes it to tilt, pull it back up and stomp the soil again to hold it firmly. In especially windy areas, staking may be necessary.

► **Planting Container trees.** Container grown trees can be stored for some time after purchase as long as they are kept watered (usually every other day). It is best to keep them out of full sun while storing them. The planting instructions, above, also apply to container trees. When the hole is dug, remove the container. This can be done by laying the tree down and knocking the container off, if necessary. You rarely need to cut the pot off. Save the pot for a gardening bucket or return it to the nursery for reuse. If the tree seems especially root bound, with roots circling round and round, you should score the sides of the root ball by cutting vertically down the sides with a knife in two or three places, and butterfly the bottom of the root ball with crisscrossing cuts. Continue to plant as outlined above.

## Water, Mulch and Fertilizer

**Watering.** Newly planted trees should be well watered at the time of planting. In addition, during the first growing season, they should be watered at least once a week in the absence of rain, more often during the height of the summer. However, care should be taken not to overwater as this may result in oxygen deprivation.

If you are uncertain as to whether a tree needs watering, dig down 6-8 inches at the edge of the planting hole. If the soil at that depth feels powdery or crumbly, the tree needs water. Adequately moistened soil should form a ball when squeezed.

Regular deep soakings are better than frequent light wettings. Moisture should reach a depth of 12 to 18 inches below the soil surface to encourage ideal root growth.

**Mulching.** A tree's best friend, mulch insulates soil, retains moisture, keeps out weeds, prevents soil compaction, reduces lawnmower damage, and adds an aesthetic touch to a yard or street. The back filled soil surrounding newly-planted trees can be covered with mulch consisting of material such as bark, wood chips or pine needles (although the acidity associated with pine needles is not suited for many plants). Mulch depth should be between 3 to 4 inches, but not touching the trunk. Thus, the mulch will be in the shape of a doughnut. Do not, under any circumstances, cover the area surrounding the tree with plastic sheeting since air and water movement are prevented. Porous landscape fabric can be used since it freely allows water and air penetration.

**Fertilizer.** Get your tree off to a good start with a good organic fertilizer. With organic fertilizer, you don't have to worry about burning roots. We put a little in the hole before we set the tree in place, mix some in as we backfill, and sprinkle some more on top after backfilling. To compensate for root loss during planting and to alleviate transplant shock, watering in your tree with a root stimulant can be very helpful.



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