

## Tips for Planting Trees

By Kate O'Lenic, Master Gardener

It is time to plan for tree planting and celebrating Arbor Day on April 19, 2024. Here are some timely tips to make planting your new trees a success.

To select the RIGHT tree for the RIGHT place, think about the following:

Native trees offer excellent benefits to pollinators. See "SP515 Native Trees for Tennessee," The University of Tennessee Agricultural Extension Service, SP 515-15M-7/98 R12-4910-11-001-99, [https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk\\_agexfores/50](https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_agexfores/50).

Soil - It is best to have your soil tested to determine if amendments are needed for a healthy tree. You can get containers and instructions from your County Extension Agent.

Location, location, location - Make sure it will be far enough from a structure to avoid damage in the event of a severe storm. Check for drains, power lines, sewer, or septic pipes. Make sure roots are far enough from the sidewalk or driveway to avoid damage.

Size - Select a tree that is the right size for your yard. Consider the shape of the tree for aesthetics. Make sure it is suitable for your USDA climate zone and soil type. Check how fast will it grow and its expected length of life.

Ongoing care - Consider how much work the tree will require to maintain it. If it sheds a lot of pollen, if branches break easily, if it is susceptible to disease or pests it means high maintenance (pruning, cleaning up of branches, treatment for diseases or pests).

You can find more details about the right tree/right place at: "SP511 Plant the Right Tree in the Right Place," The University of Tennessee Agricultural Extension Service, SP 511-15M-7/98 R12-4910-11-001-99, <https://utia.tennessee.edu/publications/wp-content/uploads/sites/269/2023/10/SP511.pdf>

Here's a catchy phrase to help you: "Plant it high, it will thrive; plant it low, it won't grow. The root flare needs to be exposed after planting otherwise, it will be planted too low. Use the uppermost roots to determine where the root flare is if it is not obvious. This will be your guide to the planting depth needed to ensure the root flare is not buried.

Here are some additional general guidelines.

1. Dig the hole no deeper than the root ball using the root flare as the top measurement.
2. Make sure the hole is about twice the diameter of the root ball.
3. Moisten the hole and the root ball the day before planting and make sure bare root plants are kept moist.
4. Do not add fertilizer or compost to the hole. It can slow root development.
5. Do not loosen the soil under where the root ball will sit. It can result in the plant sinking too low once the soil compacts from the weight of the tree.

6. After adding soil back into the hole, water well and lightly tamp the soil with your hands. Avoid stepping on the soil as it compacts soil too much.
7. Mulch, keeping the mulch away from the trunk by about 4 inches or so.

For bare root trees, remove roots that are damaged, diseased, or too long. Make a mound about 3 to 4 inches high for the center of the root system to rest on in the hole. Spread the roots out evenly.

Balled and burlapped (B&B) and wire basketed trees need to have the burlap or wire removed before planting. If not possible, place the ball in the hole and cut away at least 12 inches of burlap or wire from the top of the ball down to allow the roots to grow out.

For trees purchased in containers, if roots appear pot-bound, use a utility knife to make 4 downward cuts about 1 inch deep spaced around the root ball. If roots circle the ball, use pruners to remove them.

If the site is quite windy, the tree root ball is small compared to the above-ground tree, or if bare root trees are planted, they may be at risk of falling and may require staking. Otherwise, staking is discouraged because trees benefit from swaying naturally by developing anchoring roots faster and stronger trunks. Wire or ropes used to tether the tree loosely to the stakes need hose or other flexible covering to prevent damage to the bark. Loose tethering allows the tree some movement which as mentioned is helpful for root and trunk development. Remove the stakes and tethers after one year.

For more details about planting trees, see “Planting a Tree or Shrub,” University of Maryland Extension, <https://extension.umd.edu/resource/planting-tree-or-shrub/>.

### **How do I ask a question?**

If you have a question for the Master Gardeners, submit them to us on our website at [www.netmga.net](http://www.netmga.net). Click the link at the top of the page, “ASK A MASTER GARDENER” to send in your question. Questions that are not answered in this column will receive a response from a Master Gardener to the contact information you provide.