

## Proper Tree Planting for Earth Day

### Don't Bury Me: A hole dug too deep is a sure way to kill a tree

Earth Day and Arbor Day are coming soon - in April. Celebrate the wondrous benefits of trees and make a wise investment by planting a shade tree in your yard! But before you plant, take some advice from the experts to help your new tree live a long time.

"Too often, consumers waste hundreds of dollars on trees that will die because they were planted too deep," cautions Tchukki Andersen, BCMA, CTSP\* and staff arborist with the Tree Care Industry Association (TCIA).

"Proper planting is absolutely essential for the success of a transplanted tree," says Andersen. "Using quality plants and following up with good tree care practices, such as watering, pruning and fertilizing, will not save a poorly planted tree. The most common mistake is planting the root ball too deep," she says.

### Homeowners can purchase trees packaged in three common forms:

1. **Bare-Root plants** may be sold with the roots tightly packed in a moisture-retaining medium that is wrapped with paper or plastic, or with roots loosely covered by a moist packing medium. Roots must be adequately moistened prior to planting. Roots are spread out evenly in the hole when planting.
2. **Balled and Burlapped (B & B) trees** are moved with a ball of soil protecting their root system. Soil balls are heavy, so professional arborists who have proper equipment should be hired to plant large trees. Smaller B & B trees should be carried with a hand under the ball. Carrying a B & B tree by the stem or branches can result in serious root damage. When planting, carefully remove the top layer of soil down to the first structural root. Set the root ball in the hole, position the tree, then remove twine and nails. Remove or fold back burlap from the upper third of the root ball.
3. **Container-Grown trees** have the advantage of a root system that is relatively undisturbed at planting, but beware of "pot-bound" container trees. Do not buy container trees that have a large amount of roots completely circling the inside of the pot. These trees will take a long time to get established after planting because the roots have difficulty growing beyond the thick ring of circling roots. Immediately before planting container trees, prune the any circling roots. Root pruning can cut up to 50 percent of the roots in container trees but this is still sufficient to permit plant establishment. This compares with pruning about 10 percent or less of the root system being transplanted with B & B trees. Always remove the container prior to planting.

Andersen advises consumers to follow these planting guidelines:

- Measure the height and diameter of the root ball or root spread.
- Dig the hole just deep enough to allow the first structural root to be at level grade. The hole's diameter should be two to three times the diameter of the root ball or root spread.
- Set the tree on undisturbed solid ground in the center of the hole. The tree should be planted so that the root flare, the base of the tree trunk where the roots begin to "flare-out," is visible and above grade.
- Backfill with soil from the planting hole, using water to pack or settle the soil around the root ball. Do not tamp soil by stepping on it.
- Mulch the planting area with 2 to 4 inches of an organic mulch such as wood chips. Do not mulch up to or against the trunk. Start the mulch 6 inches away from the tree trunk.
- Trees should be pruned after planting to remove only broken, damaged, diseased or dead branches.
- Stake and/or protect the trunk of the tree if there is a real potential for wind damage or lawn mower injury. Remove the guy wires (string, rope, wire or other used with supports) when the staking is no longer needed or the tree could be injured or even killed from girdling by the wire.
- One to three years after planting, prune to develop a good branch structure once the tree has become established in its new home. Never remove more than 25 percent of total foliage in one year. (Depending on the tree and its condition, some arborists advocate capping pruning at even a lower percentage).
- Fertilizing is not recommended at the time of planting.

### What can you do?

A professional arborist can assess your landscape and work with you to determine the best trees to plant. Contact the

Tree Care Industry Association (TCIA), a public and professional resource on trees and arboriculture since 1938. It has more than 2,000 member companies who recognize stringent safety and performance standards and who are required to carry liability insurance. TCIA has the nation's only Accreditation program that helps consumers find tree care companies that have been inspected and accredited based on: adherence to industry standards for quality and safety; maintenance of trained, professional staff; and dedication to ethics and quality in business practices. An easy way to find a tree care service provider in your area is to use the "Locate Your Local TCIA Member Companies" program. You can use this service by calling 1-800-733-2622 or by doing a ZIP Code search on [www.treecaretips.org](http://www.treecaretips.org).

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