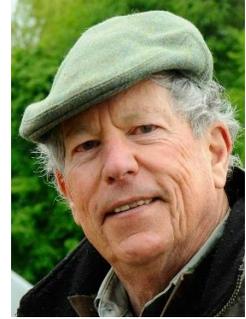


How to Plant a Tree

By Al Call
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Make the process a family event

“Blessed is the society in which old men plant trees in whose shade they shall never sit.”
---Ancient Greek Proverb

Trees are very good for the environment, useful for shade, pretty to look at, and long-lived. If you agree that all of these things are true, then an important question arises: How do you plant a tree?

First, decide what tree you want and where to plant it. “Right tree, right place” is helpful to keep in mind. Trees come in two basic categories: evergreen and deciduous. Evergreen trees keep their leaves or needles all year long; deciduous trees lose their leaves in winter. Generally, evergreen trees are useful for shade, year-round color and texture, and as privacy screens while deciduous trees can offer great fall color, more light in winter months and impressive bark and structure.

Consider how big the tree will become. Some trees grow very tall, very wide, very quickly. Do you really want that coastal redwood, which can grow to 300 ft. high and 25 ft. in diameter, up next to your front porch? Probably not. Read the label on the tree and do some basic research. Most tree labels will only tell you how large the tree will be in ten years. What you really need to know is how big it will be in twenty years and then site it accordingly.

Look carefully at the soil on your property. As most trees require good drainage to thrive, stay away from low soggy areas and be careful of planting too closely to your house. The soil near home foundations can often be of poor quality and contain many construction leftovers. Utility lines, both above and below ground, must be considered. You don’t want your shovel near that underground gas line. Nor do want your tree after a few years to be entangled with overhead utility wires. Many excellent examples of ugly tree pruning can be found where trees have been planted under such wires.

Now that you have your tree and have picked a spot to plant it, make it a family event. Pry the kids—or the grandkids—away from their smart phones and introduce them to hard labor. Grab a shovel or two, a good size tarp, a gardening knife, and head on out to the site.

Take another close look at your tree. Cut away any broken branches. Examine the root ball—this is important. If the ball is wrapped in burlap, take the burlap off. If the ball is in a pot, carefully pull the pot away. Examine the root ball for twisted and broken roots. Cut off the broken roots, then tease out and straighten the rest. It’s okay if some of the soil from the root ball falls away.



Backfill with native soil, form a berm and water deeply to purge air pockets. *Photo by Everett Chu / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners.*

Spread out the tarp next to the hole. Hand shovels to the kids and appoint yourself supervisor. With as much authority as you can muster, give the command, “Commence digging!” Excellent. The hole should be dug two to three times the width of the root ball and no deeper than the depth of the root ball. The sides of the hole should slope slightly down and inward like a mixing bowl. Dirt goes on the tarp.

Position the tree in the hole with a small mound of dirt underneath to support the roots that you’ve carefully spread out. The root ball crown should be an inch or two above ground level. Carefully return soil to the hole, using fingers to press soil among the roots. No stomping of dirt with feet allowed!

Fertilizers and special planting soils are normally not required. Tree roots need to grow out and away from their root ball home. The roots won’t do that if you add all that “good stuff” to the hole. When the hole is half filled, send a kid off for the hose and water the tree. This will help eliminate any air pockets that remain among the roots. Finish filling the hole with dirt, and again, no stomping around it. Water once more. Make sure the root crown is still an inch or so above ground.

Do not stake the tree unless it is very unstable in the hole or the site is very windy. Research has proven that unstaked trees establish themselves more quickly, developing more roots with stronger, larger trunks. If staking is necessary, use two stakes and tie with a flexible, wide, soft material to the lower half of the trunk. Staking should only be necessary for a year or so. Finally, add a good mulch, about two to three inches in depth, around the tree. Do not pile up mulch around the tree trunk. Keep it four to six inches away.

Round up the kids, take a selfie and celebrate. Cookies for all. Start planning for that next tree, but don't forget about this one. Keep the little guy well-watered in spring, summer, and fall for at least a couple of years. But don't overdo it. The root ball needs to stay moist—not saturated. Gently dig down near the root ball with a trowel occasionally to make sure the soil is moist. Depending on rainfall, you may not need to water at all in winter.

Well done!

RESOURCES:

- “Planting Trees and Shrubs in the Landscape.” WSU Extension Fact Sheet FS047E
- Chalker-Scott, Linda, 2008. The Informed Gardener.