

Tree Care Basics

Care of Newly Planted Trees



Newly planted trees need active care during the entire establishment period. Survival depends on its care for the first two to three years after planting. Consistent and proper care during the establishment period is the most important step to helping trees succeed.

Watering

One vital thing to assist a newly-planted tree establish itself is to provide consistent and appropriate watering. The first watering after planting should be a deep soaking. Slowly apply water to the base of the tree, soaking the entire root mass. Frequently check the moisture status of the rootball and water when it begins to dry out. Tree watering bags or leaky buckets can reduce run-off while deeply and thoroughly wetting the rootball.

Continue to provide supplemental watering at least once a week, applying 1 to 2 gallons per diameter inch of the trunk at each watering. Differing soil and weather conditions will affect the frequency with which water must be added. Well-drained, sandy soil will need water more often than clay soil, which may hold water longer.

As roots grow and spread, irrigation volume and watering area will need to be increased. Extend watering beyond the initial planting hole, encompassing a circle about 5 feet in diameter. Soaker hoses are a good option but will require a longer watering time.

Mulching

Adding mulch around the base of the plant is an integral part of tree care. Mulching provides a more favorable environment for the trees' roots. It allows for better water infiltration, holds soil moisture, limits weed growth, and discourages injury from lawnmowers and weed whips. Apply a 2 to 3 inch layer of mulch, and spread to at least a 3-foot diameter circle around the tree. Do not pile mulch up against the trunk. Pull mulch at least 4 inches away from the trunk. Plastic liners under mulch are not recommended, as they can cause roots to suffocate.

Organic mulch like wood chips, pine needles, hardwood, and softwood bark are good options. Each type of mulch will decompose at different rates and need to be replenished as it decomposes.

Pruning

Avoid severely pruning newly planted trees. Severe pruning reduces the tree's ability to manufacture food and slows plant growth. Newly planted trees require only corrective pruning to remove structural defects, such as double leaders and dead, broken, or crossing branches.

Retain the lower branches as they help stabilize the tree, improving trunk size and strength. As the tree grows, gradually remove the lower limbs only if necessary making sure branches are 1 to 2 inches in diameter or less.



FIG.1. Newly planted trees only require corrective pruning.

Staking

Most newly planted trees do not require staking. However, top-heavy trees and those planted in windy, exposed sites may require staking. If staking is necessary, allow the trunk to move or sway for proper trunk and root development.

Position one to three stakes outside of the planting hole in undisturbed soil and position low on the trunk. Use wide, flexible materials like canvas or rubber to support the tree and prevent damage to the trunk. Rope, twine, and wire may cause abrasion to the stem, can potentially girdle the trunk, and are not recommended. Remove stakes after one to two growing seasons.

Wrapping

Installing plastic tubing or hardware cloth around the trunks of young trees will help protect them from rodent and deer damage. Using white plastic guards to reflect the sun will keep the bark at a more constant temperature, and help prevent winter sunscalds.

Tubes should be big enough to allow 1 to 4 inches of space between them and the trunk and be 1 to 3 feet tall. Protection can be applied at any time, and left on all year round as long as it does not touch the bark. As trees grow, the tube must be enlarged and eventually removed.

Fertilizing

Generally, it is not necessary to fertilize newly planted trees. Most soils can supply sufficient amounts of nutrients during establishment. Apply fertilizers only if a soil test shows that nutrients are lacking and trees show signs of poor growth, such as sparse foliage, yellow-green leaves, or short annual twig growth.

Use caution when applying weed and feed to your lawn. These products may injure or kill trees. Do not use anything with a label stating it will kill broad-leaved weeds.

Additional Resources

For additional resources, including mulching techniques, planting guides, and more, visit extension.illinois.edu/plants/infosheets

Authors

[Sarah Vogel](#), horticulture and natural resources educator, sarahv@illinois.edu

[Jenny Lee](#), master gardener/naturalist program coordinator, jalee73@illinois.edu

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Illinois Extension
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

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