

Fall is for Planting!

By Larry Caplan, Extension Horticulture Educator, Vanderburgh County, IN

For the Evansville Courier and Press, September 17, 2017

Fall is the best time to plant trees, shrubs, and spring/summer blooming perennials. The soil is still warm, which encourages root growth, while the air temperatures are cooling, reducing stress on the plant.

I've written frequently about the need to plant trees properly. An improperly dug hole can doom a tree's survival. For best success, I recommend tilling a 10 foot wide bed, amending and loosening the soil for future root growth. The actual hole for the tree should be no deeper than the depth from the root flare to the bottom of the root ball (you may have to scrape off some soil from the top of the root ball to find the root flare). And finally, add nothing special to the backfill; the only stuff that goes into the hole is what came out of the hole.

Even if you do everything right, you may still develop problems with your tree. You may notice a thin canopy, scorching of the leaf edges, or dieback from the tips of the branches. The tree may develop early fall color, or drop its leaves earlier than normal; it may also leaf out later in the spring than others of its species. All of these are symptoms of a condition we call "transplant shock."

Transplant shock is a catch-all term used to describe the stresses that a tree undergoes during transplanting, such as: loss of roots from being dug up in the nursery; drying out of roots while waiting for purchase at the garden center; sunscald on the trunk and limbs; rough handling, which bruises the cambium under the bark, or breaks even more roots; improper planting; and improper post-planting care.

The best way to avoid transplant shock is to purchase your trees from reputable local nurseries and garden centers. Digging trees up from the woods fails more often than it succeeds; and I'm a little leery of those transient vendors who sell trees from the back of a truck in a parking lot.

After properly planting your tree (see above), you need to care for it. Trees are at high stress levels for at least three to five years after planting, because of the roots during the digging and transport process. Just because the tree leafs out the following spring, doesn't mean it has become established in your yard. Transplants are not considered established until their primary roots have expanded out into the surrounding native soil.

To encourage root expansion, be sure to water more than just the spot next to the trunk. Remember, roots grow where there IS water; they don't grow searching for it. Apply one-half gallon of water per square foot, once each week. Spread mulch outward beyond the planting hole you dug, and do not mound it against the trunk (we call that "volcano mulching"). The mulch keeps the soil from drying out, protects the trunk from damage from lawn mowers and weed-eaters, and reduces competition from one of the toughest weeds of all: your lawn.

For more information on proper planting and transplant shock, please contact the Purdue Extension Service at (812) 435-5287.