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Ten rules for planting trees this spring

K-State horticulture expert shares tips to set you up for success

K-State Research and Extension news service

MANHATTAN, Kan. — If you're planning to plant a tree in your yard this spring, there are some steps you can take to make sure your new landscape has its best chance of success.

Kansas State University horticulture expert Cynthia Domenghini shares the following 10 rules for planting trees:

Select the right tree for the site.

To avoid serious problems, choose trees that are adapted to your location. Consider whether the tree produces nuisance fruit or if there are disease-resistant varieties available. For example, there are a number of crabapple varieties that are resistant to apple scab and rust diseases. Also consider the mature size of a tree to be sure you have enough room. Your local extension office and garden center can make tree recommendations for your region.

Keep the tree well watered and in a shady location until planting.

When moving the tree, lift it by the root ball or pot and not by the trunk.

Before planting, remove all wires, labels, cords or anything else tied to the plant.

If left on, they may eventually girdle the branch to which they are attached.

Dig a proper hole.

Make the hole deep enough so the root flare (point where the trunk and roots meet) is visible when planted. Plant the tree on solid ground, not fill dirt. In other words, don't dig the hole too deep and then add soil back to the hole before placing the tree.

The width of the planting hole is very important. It should be three times the width of the root ball. Loosening the soil outside the hole so it is five times the diameter of the root ball will allow the tree to spread its roots faster.

Remove all containers from the root ball.

Cut away plastic and peat pots; roll burlap and wire baskets back into the hole, cutting as much of the excess away as possible. If you can remove the wire basket without disturbing the root ball, do it. If roots have been circling around in the container, cut them and fluff them out so they do not continue growing in a circle inside the hole becoming girdling roots later.

Backfill the hole with the same soil that was removed.

Amendments such as peat moss likely do more harm than good. Make sure the soil that goes back is loosened - no clods or clumps. Add water as you fill to ensure good root to soil contact and prevent air pockets. There is no need to fertilize at planting.

Minimize pruning after planting.

Foliage is necessary for manufacturing energy to support a healthy tree. Heavy pruning reduces the number of leaves and consequently the amount of energy generated. Corrective pruning can be done at planting to remove dead, damaged or diseased branches or branches that are rubbing against each other.

Water the tree thoroughly.

Then, water once a week for the first season if there is insufficient rainfall.

Mulch around the tree.

Mulch should be 2-4 inches deep and cover an area 2 to 3 times the diameter of the root ball. Avoid mulching right up to the trunk of the tree. Leave a 3 to 6-inch gap between the mulch and the trunk to prevent damaging the tree. Mulching reduces competition from other plants, conserves moisture and moderates soil temperature.

Stake only when necessary.

Larger trees or those in windy locations may need to be staked the first year. Movement is necessary for the trunk and roots to develop properly. Staking should be designed to limit movement of the root ball rather than immobilize the trunk.

Domenghini and her colleagues in K-State's Department of Horticulture and Natural Resources produce a [weekly Horticulture Newsletter](#) with tips for maintaining home landscapes and gardens.

Interested persons can subscribe to the newsletter, as well as send their garden and yard-related questions to hortsupport@ksu.edu, or contact your [local K-State Research and Extension office](#).

FOR PRINT PUBLICATIONS: Links used in this story

K-State Horticulture Newsletter, <https://hnr.k-state.edu/extension/info-center/newsletters/index.html>

K-State Research and Extension local offices, <https://www.ksre.k-state.edu/about/statewide-locations.html>

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