HORTICULTURE COLUMN

PLANTING TREES & SHRUBS

Fall is a perfect time for planting cold hardy trees and shrubs. Roots continue to develop during the winter months and will be well formed in time to support vigorous spring growth.

Proper planting practices help plants establish quickly in your landscape.

Roots need air spaces and adequate moisture. Fill soil used for the house foundation must be compacted to avoid settling and cracking of the concrete slab. This soil condition is not well suited to plant growth since compaction removes much needed air space as well as water holding capacity.

Most plants are not adapted to compact, soggy fill soils often found in new developments. It is best to remove unsuitable soil before planting a large landscape. Replace compacted, poorly drained soil with topsoil containing well-rotted organic matter mixed with sand.

When fill dirt is used for the house foundation, plants will benefit if topsoil is added to the lawn and landscape bed areas, especially the planting area near the house foundation. We recommend that developers scrape the topsoil off the house area and stockpile it in a storage area before the fill dirt is spread on the lot. After the house is built, the topsoil can be spread and the final grading work done.

Outdated planting recommendations suggested digging a planting hole larger and deeper than the root ball or the container. While the practice provided loose soil for roots to grow into, it also allowed the plant to settle into the hole and get buried too deeply. Digging the planting hole too deep often results in excessive soil piled over the roots system. Slow plant decline and eventual plant death usually follow.

New recommendations suggest digging the planting hole three times as wide and only as deep as the growing container. The wide planting hole still allows for easy root growth.

Check soil drainage at the planting site. If you are not sure how well the soil drains, dig a hole as if to set a fence post. Fill it with water and wait to see how long it takes for the water to drain away.

Rapid soil drainage is normal for our sandy soils and indicates that plants can be set in the ground so the top of the root ball is even with the top of the surrounding soil. No fertilizer or organic soil amendments are necessary. Just use existing soil to fill the planting hole. Add water as you fill the hole then water to settle the soil around plant roots. It is critical that plants are watered well individually at planting time and then for watered as needed for several months until they develop roots into the surrounding soil.

Cover the area around landscape trees and shrubs with a 3” to 4” layer of mulch. Always pull the mulch several inches away from the stems or main trunk. Spread the mulch at least to the edge of the branches of trees or to the edge of a landscape planting bed. The ring of mulch helps reduce accidental damage that occurs when mowing too close to tree trunks or shrubs. Mulch also conserves soil moisture and prevents many weeds.

If it takes more than a few hours for water to drain from your test hole, you have a drainage problem and planting modifications are necessary. In poorly drained or compacted soil, plants will benefit from being planted slightly higher than the natural grade (surrounding soil level) to allow for better soil aeration and root growth during wet times.

At planting, part of the root ball will be above the ground, but soil should be added around the root ball so no roots are exposed. The plants will look like they are planted on little islands in the flower bed. Spread mulch so that it is thin near the plants and thicker in between for a level appearance.
Newly planting shrubs and trees need special watering. Overhead sprinklers are usually inadequate. Microsprinklers or bubblers designed to water the root area are best at providing water for new plants in the landscape. Close attention to watering is needed to make sure the root ball stays moist but not soggy.

Check daily and water as needed to wet the entire root ball. Daily watering may be necessary for the first week in well drained soil in hot weather. Then adjust to water every other day for 2 to 4 weeks. Once established, weekly watering may adequate. Many native plants grow well with only natural rainfall once established.

Enjoy the change in weather and get growing.

Contact the Osceola County Extension office at (321) 697-3000 for a detailed publication on planting trees and shrubs or check out the EDIS key word link on our website at http://osceola.ifas.ufl.edu.

Volunteers interested in the health of our lake can join us for lake litter pick up on Lake Tohopekaliga today. I will be working with a youth group, The Train Gang, and the Jaycees picking up litter at the waterfront. We will meet at the Jaycees sign by the boat ramps at 8 a.m. at the lakefront park. Bring your boat and help or walk the shore with us. Grubby clothes and shoes are a must. We will have a county wide cleanup on November 11. Call (321) 697-3000 if you can help with that major event.

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