PLAN FOR ARBOR DAY

Florida Arbor Day is Friday. Plan now for an Arbor Day tree-planting project for your yard, your school, your office or the community. Make it special and plant a tree.

Arbor Day took root in Nebraska, a prairie state, to encourage the early settlers to plant trees on farms and in cities in the largely treeless state. According to the National Arbor Day Foundation, J. Sterling Morton, a newspaper editor, proposed to the Nebraska Board of Agriculture that a special day be set aside for the planting of trees. More than a million trees were planted that first Arbor Day. National Arbor Day is the last Friday in April, so much of the country will be celebrating then.

Florida designated Arbor Day in January because it is such a great time for tree planting. While many northern gardeners plant trees in April, Floridians don't have to wait for frozen soils to warm up. Legislators adopted the third Friday in January as Florida's Arbor Day.

Even though we have cold January days, this month is ideal for planting trees and shrubs. January weather makes it comfortable to work outside and conditions are good for plant establishment.

Cold-hardy landscape plants produce little top growth during cold months. However, root growth continues throughout the winter. Plants installed in landscapes now will begin to establish a good root system before top growth starts in late February or March.

Ed Gilman, from the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, explains tree planting and care in his circular on Community Tree Care. Circular 1019 is available free from the Osceola County Extension Office at 1921 Kissimmee Valley Lane in Osceola Heritage Park.

One of the major factors in establishing landscape plants is selecting the best plant for the site. Select a plant that is compatible with the soil, water and light conditions. Master Gardener volunteers, nurserymen, reference books, and computer databases provide you with a variety of information to help with plant selection.

Plant quality is important. Look for trees with a well-developed central leader that will develop a strong trunk. Select small trees instead of larger ones for easy establishment in landscapes. Some folks want the instant tree effect, but the larger trees have more difficulty in surviving the stress of planting and require more intensive care.

Another important factor in establishing landscape plants is proper planting. Dig the planting hole three times wider and only as deep as the root ball. In areas that are poorly drained, it is best to dig an even shallower hole so the plant sits higher than the surrounding soil. Then mound soil to slightly cover the root ball. There is no benefit to adding organic matter or fertilizer to the soil at planting time.

Create a ring of soil around the edge of the planting area to hold water over the root system. Then spread a 3" thick layer of organic mulch over the soil to help conserve moisture while the plant is getting established. The mulched area should be 2’ in diameter for each inch of trunk diameter. This one practice can result in a 50% increase in tree growth and establishment just by eliminating competition from grass for water and nutrients. Pull the mulch away from the trunk to prevent trunk rot.

Watering during and after planting is critical to tree survival. Trees planted in sandy, well-drained soil will need 3 to 5 gallons of water per inch of trunk diameter almost daily for the first several months after planting. If soil drainage is poor, less water is needed but still water frequently. Larger trees may need nearly daily irrigation for up to a year to become established.
Fertilizer should not be applied at planting time. Wait for new leaves to sprout, then only apply half a pound of a slow release 16-4-8 fertilizer spread evenly over the top of the mulch and soil in a 10'-by-10' area. Do this in the spring and fall for the first two years. After that, the roots should be well established into the lawn area and the roots will get fertilized when the lawn gets fertilized.

Trees cut heating and cooling costs, moderate the temperature, reduce erosion of our precious topsoil by wind and water, clean the air, produce life-giving oxygen, and provide habitat for wildlife. They are a renewable resource that give us paper, wood for our homes, fuel for our fires, and beautify our community. Show your appreciation for the value of trees and celebrate Arbor Day.

The Osceola Master Gardeners are celebrating Arbor Day at the St. Cloud lakefront by planting an oak tree near the children’s playground and concession stand. Join us at 1:30 p.m. in dedicating the tree and celebrating the 20th anniversary of the Master Gardener Program in Osceola County. Marie Eastberg, Ernie Elliott, Charlotte Johnson and Dot Starkey will be recognized as charter members who are still active volunteers for the Osceola County Extension Service Office.

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