

Planting Trees & Shrubs

OVERVIEW

Proper planting technique is the single most important factor in the long-term success of a tree or shrub. A well-planted tree in average soil will outperform a poorly planted tree in excellent soil every time. This guide covers the GARDENWORKS-recommended approach for getting every new plant off to the best possible start.

BEFORE YOU PLANT - SITE PLANNING AND PREPARATION

- Choose a location where the plant has enough room for its natural branching habit at maturity: read the label for mature height and spread
- Be aware of overhead power lines, roof overhangs, and underground utilities (sewer, electrical, drainage tile): avoid planting large trees above them
- Check for underground utilities before digging: call BC One Call (1-800-474-6886) for a locate service
- Best planting times: early spring (March-April) or fall (September-October) when temperatures are mild and soil moisture is naturally higher

PLANTING STEPS THE GARDENWORKS PLANTING METHOD

Step 1 Dig the hole

Dig a hole twice as wide as the root ball diameter, but only as deep as the root ball height. Rough up the sides of the hole (especially in clay soil: smooth sides restrict root penetration). Place the removed soil to the side.

Step 2 Prepare the backfill

Mix the native soil from the hole with quality topsoil or compost at a 70:30 ratio (70% native soil, 30% amendment). Do not use pure compost or potting mix as backfill: this discourages roots from extending into the surrounding soil.

Step 3 Remove the container

Plastic pot: carefully remove the moistened root ball. Loosen any tightly wound or circling roots with your hands or a blunt knife. Balled and burlap: place in the hole at the same depth as originally grown. Cut away as much twine as possible; remove as much burlap as possible without disturbing the root ball. Remaining burlap will decompose naturally. Fibre pot: water thoroughly and let sit for 1 hour. Cut the lip level with the soil in the pot. Slit the sides of the pot 5-6 times from top to bottom. Place in the hole without removing from the pot.

Step 4 Set the plant

The top of the root ball should be level with or very slightly above the surrounding soil. Never plant deeper than the original growing depth: burying the root flare is a leading cause of long-term decline.

Step 5 Backfill

Fill the hole with your native soil and amendment mixture. Firm gently with your hands to eliminate air pockets. Do not compact with your feet. Build a small berm around the outer edge of the root ball (the drip line) to direct water to the roots.

Step 6 Water and fertilize

Water slowly and deeply immediately after planting using GARDENWORKS Transplanting Fertilizer 5-15-5 (water-soluble). Apply at least 3 times in the first growing season, at least 1 month apart. For dormant-season planting (fall through late winter): use GARDENWORKS Bone Meal 2-14-0 instead. Apply 1 handful per foot of plant height, worked into the backfill around the root ball.

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STAKING - WHEN AND HOW TO STAKE

- Most newly planted trees should not be staked: free movement in wind stimulates the development of strong anchoring roots
- Staking creates dependency and can cause long-term structural weakness if left in place too long
- Exception: stake only if the site is extremely exposed and windy, or the tree is at risk of being pushed out of the ground

HOW TO STAKE CORRECTLY

- Place the stake at least 46 cm from the trunk, driven into undisturbed soil
- Attach stake to tree with heavy twine or wire; protect the bark where wire contacts the tree with a section of rubber hose
- Allow some movement: the tie should not hold the trunk rigid
- Remove the stake after one full growing season; leaving it longer causes the tree to become reliant on it

CARE - THE FIRST GROWING SEASON

- Water deeply and regularly through the first summer: the first year is the most critical period for establishment
- Mulch around the root zone (5-8 cm deep) to retain moisture, regulate soil temperature, and suppress weeds; keep mulch clear of the trunk
- Monitor for stress signs: wilting in morning (not just midday heat), leaf scorch, or dieback indicate insufficient water or root disturbance
- Do not prune heavily in the first season: allow the plant to put energy into root establishment

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

How long until my new tree is established?

A general rule of thumb: one year of establishment per 2.5 cm of trunk diameter. A tree with a 5 cm trunk needs approximately 2 years of attentive watering and care before it is fully self-sufficient. Shrubs typically establish within 1-2 growing seasons.

Can I add fertilizer to the planting hole?

Only use the specific products recommended here. GARDENWORKS Bone Meal 2-14-0 can be mixed into the backfill and directly encourages root development without the risk of fertilizer burn. Avoid high-nitrogen granular fertilizers in the planting hole: they can burn roots and push leafy growth before the root system is established.

My newly planted tree is wilting. Is it dying?

Mild wilting during the hottest part of the day is normal for newly planted trees. If the tree wilts in the morning before the day heats up, or does not recover overnight, it needs more water. Check that the root ball itself is moist (not just the surface soil) and increase your watering frequency. Ensure the root ball has not dried out completely, which can occur even during rainy periods if the root ball is not yet integrated with the surrounding soil.

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