

Planting a Tree the Right Way



Adapted from the [video guide by Joe Lamp'l](#)
Photos by Joe Lamp'l

Trees (and shrubs) can be planted any time of the year that you can dig the proper planting hole. However, other times are better than others for multiple reasons. Summer is the harshest time, so the more days you can put between the time you plant a tree and the arrival of summer, the better. That makes fall the very best time of year to relocate trees and shrubs or plant new ones. Early spring is a great time too.

To plant a tree the right way, follow these steps:

- 1. Prepare a proper planting hole.** When preparing any hole for planting, make it three times wider than the current root mass but never deeper than the plant was growing in a previous environment.



The best guide is to look for the flare of the trunk near the soil level; don't place the tree in the planting hole so deep that any part of that flare is covered with soil. An easy way to know whether your hole is at the right depth is to lay your shovel handle across the grade; the top of the root ball or tree flare should be at or above the handle level.



- 2. Inspect the roots and disturb when necessary.** Once the plant is out of its container, look at the roots. If they are densely bound in a circular pattern or have started growing in the shape of the container (even slightly), break up the pattern. Don't worry about hurting the roots or losing soil as you break the roots apart; this will be key to it surviving and thriving. Better to give the roots a fresh start than allow the constrictive pattern to only get worse below ground. While you don't want to be any rougher than necessary, do what you must to change the pattern.

Scratch your fingers across the sides and bottom of the root mass. You can slice up the roots vertically with a pruning saw, and/or pull apart the root mass to clearly create new opportunities for noncircular new root development.

- 3. Don't amend the soil.** Contrary to traditional planting methods, contemporary research indicates that you should not amend the hole with additional organic material. Roots growing in amended soil rarely venture into harder native soil. The long-term affect is a smaller root system, reduced growth, and a less hardy plant.

Instead, simply break up the clumps in existing soil, removing the rocks and backfill. Studies show plant roots growing in only the native soil actually did a better job at establishing and expanding beyond the original hole.

- 4. Eliminate air pockets.** Lightly tamp or hand-pack the soil around the plant roots to ensure good soil-to-root contact, or add a stiff spray of water to the hole after backfilling halfway. The water not only provides needed moisture but also helps eliminate air. Finally, water again gently but thoroughly after all the soil is in place.

- 5. Add mulch.** Starting about 2 inches from the trunk (leave this area exposed), place roughly 2 inches of organic matter such as shredded leaves or ground bark around the tree, at least out to the drip line. Further is better. Mulch helps retain much-needed moisture and keeps roots cooler near the surface—important requirements for newly installed plants.
- 6. Water properly until established.** The most important step during the planting process is to keep up with the watering until your tree is fully established. Sometimes this is the first few years.

Watering should be slow and deep. Accomplishing that by hand is not practical. The only way to establish trees properly is with soaker hoses or drip irrigation. This method allows the soil around the roots to saturate, so the tree has time to absorb moisture while avoiding excess runoff. Short, manual blasts of water from an overhead hose or sprinkler system simply don't come close to providing the same effectiveness for water delivery.



Soil that appears dry at the top may be very wet a few inches down. In the first few weeks, soil that is moist but not soggy is your target range. The amount of time you need to water each week will depend on your method of delivery. One of the best time-savers that lightens the load and puts your irrigation duties on autopilot is the use of soaker hoses and/or drip irrigation combined with portable battery-operated timers.

- 7. Don't fertilize at first.** Don't fertilize at all until your tree has taken to its new environment through successful establishment. Maybe in year two. All the tree's energy should be concentrated on root development first. Adopt the walk-before-you-run approach. Monitoring your newly planted trees for signs of distress over time will be the ultimate deciding factor in their success.