



Please Don't Bury Me! A hole dug too deep is a sure way to kill a tree

Spring is prime planting season in most areas of the country. Too often, however, consumers waste hundreds of dollars on trees that will die because they were planted too deep.

“Proper planting is absolutely essential in the failure or success of a transplanted tree,” says Peter Gerstenberger, senior advisor for Safety, Standards & Compliance with the Tree Care Industry Association. “Using quality plants and following up with good tree care practices such as watering, pruning and fertilizing, will not save a poorly planted tree. The most common mistake is planting the root ball too deep,” cautions Gerstenberger.

Homeowners can purchase trees packaged in three common forms:

1. Bare-Root plants may be sold with the roots tightly packed in a moisture-retaining medium that is wrapped with paper or plastic, or with roots loosely covered by a moist packing medium. Roots must be adequately moistened prior to planting. Roots are spread out evenly in the hole when planting.
2. Balled and Burlapped (B & B) trees are moved with a ball of soil protecting their root system. Soil balls are heavy, so professional arborists who have proper equipment should be hired to plant large trees. Smaller B & B trees should be carried with a hand under the ball. Carrying a B & B tree by the stem or branches can result in serious root damage. When planting, set the root ball in the hole, position the tree, then remove twine and nails. Remove or fold back burlap from the upper third of the root ball.
3. Container-Grown trees have the advantage of a root system that is relatively undisturbed at planting, but beware of “pot-bound” container trees. Do not buy container trees that have a large amount of roots completely circling the inside of the pot.” These trees will take a long time to get established after planting because the roots have difficulty growing beyond the thick ring of circling roots. Immediately before planting container trees, prune the roots. Root pruning can cut up to 50 percent of the roots in container trees but this is still sufficient to permit plant establishment. This compares with pruning about 10 percent or less of the root system being transplanted with B & B trees. Always remove the container prior to planting.

Gerstenberger advises consumers to follow these planting guidelines:

- ◆ Measure the height and diameter of the root ball or root spread.
- ◆ Dig the hole 1 to 3 inches shallower than root ball or root depth. The hole's diameter should be 2 to 3 times the diameter of the root ball or root spread.
- ◆ Set the tree on undisturbed solid ground in the center of the area. The tree should be planted so that the root flare, the base of the tree trunk where the roots begin to "flare-out," is visible and above grade.
- ◆ Backfill with soil from the planting hole, using water to pack or settle the soil around the root ball.
- ◆ Mulch the planting area with 2 to 4 inches of an organic mulch such as wood chips. Do not mulch up to or against the trunk.
- ◆ Trees should be pruned after planting to remove broken, damaged, diseased or dead branches.
- ◆ Stake and/or protect the trunk of the tree if there is a real potential for wind damage or lawn mower injury. Remove the guy wires when the staking is no longer needed or the tree could be injured or even killed from girdling by the wire.
- ◆ Prune to develop a good branch structure once the tree has become established in its new home, usually 1-3 years after planting. Never remove more than 25 percent of total foliage in one year.
- ◆ Fertilizing is not recommended at the time of planting.