

Now is the time for planting

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Fall is an ideal time for planting many shrubs and trees. The roots of woody shrubs and trees continue to grow during the winter here in the South. If planted during November through January, the plants have five or six months to establish roots in the new planting site before June and the arrival of hot weather.

Now is a much better planting time than spring, when many people traditionally do planting. Plus, the nurseries are less crowded now.

Most trees and shrubs are offered as container-grown plants. Though this method of growing has made for easier handling and planting, establishment is still not foolproof.

Here are some guidelines from Dan Mullins with the University of Florida IFAS Extension in Santa Rosa County to ensure success with planting projects:

- Choose healthy plants with good structure. Do not purchase trees with main double leaders or with branches that are clustered together on the trunk.
- The root system of a container-grown plant should be well-established so that the root ball stays intact when the container is removed. The plant, however, should not be root-bound or have roots protruding outside the container or penetrating into the ground.
- Although cutting or breaking up the root mass during planting has been recommended in the past, there is no strong scientific evidence to support the benefit of it. It is better to avoid investing money or effort in a root-bound plant.
- Do not prune away any of the top portion of trees and shrubs when transplanting. Recent studies have revealed that some auxins, or chemicals that help stimulate root growth, are located in branch tips. Allow new plants to grow for several months before any major pruning. Allow trees a full growing season before pruning.
- When planting a tree or free-standing shrub in the yard, no soil amendments are recommended. The age-old practice of placing manure, peat or compost in the planting hole can be detrimental rather than helpful in the long term.
- When preparing beds for mass plantings of shrubs, soil amendments can be helpful. But they should be spread evenly over the entire bed and tilled to mix with the existing soil, not placed in the planting hole.
- Dig planting holes a foot wider but no deeper than the root ball, and set each tree or shrub so that it is a little higher than the surrounding soil surface when planting is finished. Ed Gilman of the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences says it is very important to leave the top of the root ball so that it is above ground level and visible.
- Do not pile excess soil around the base of a plant. Use any soil that is left over to construct a circular ridge just outside of the edge of the root ball. It will act as a basin and aid in the frequent waterings that are needed until plants are well-established.
- Water the trees or shrubs regularly. Gilman says that a tree with a trunk of 2 to 4 inches in diameter needs daily watering for a month, followed by every-other-day watering for the next two months, and then watering once or twice weekly for the rest of the first year after that. Apply three gallons of water per inch of trunk diameter. For smaller shrubs, watering every other day the first month is probably adequate. Low-volume drip irrigation is ideal for watering trees and shrubs. Kits for low-volume irrigation are relatively inexpensive, easy-to-install and very efficient with water use.
- Once planted, the surface of landscape beds should be mulched at a 2-inch depth with coarse, un-

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decomposed materials such as pine needles or bark. Recent research shows, however, that it is best to apply only a very thin layer of mulch over the root ball itself, so it won't interfere with oxygen and water penetration to the roots. Beyond the root ball, extend the mulch outward one foot for each inch of trunk diameter.

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