

Adventures in Tree Planting
Rick Abrahamson
July 30, 2009

Often, I receive calls wondering how to plant a tree so I thought it might be a good time to review proper planting techniques. Usually it is better to wait until fall or spring to plant trees but you can successfully plant trees even in the heat of summer if proper care is given to them.

Several steps are involved in properly planting a tree. Dig a wide shallow hole. Always call South Dakota One Call at 1-800-781-7474 for locates before digging. The rule of thumb is to dig the hole only as deep as the root ball and as wide as three times the width of the root ball. Wider is better, just like the Pontiac advertisements of the past. Loosen the sides of the hole to allow root penetration. When deciding how deep the tree should be placed, use the first major root as a guide. Make sure it is even with or slightly above the grade outside of the hole. Dig into the root ball to find this root and the root flare; be careful and do not mistake the graft union as the root flare. Remove all containers and cut encircling roots. Many trees die each year due to roots that circle and choke the trunk. Cutting these at planting time will cause them to grow outward. Remove any baskets and as much of the burlap as possible if planting a balled and burlaped tree.

Backfill the hole with loosened native soil. That's right; DO NOT add anything to the planting hole except what was there before you started to dig. Treat your tree with respect, not like a baby. If the planting conditions are too nice the tree will never grow outside of the hole and failure will be the result. Mulch the area around the tree with 2-3 inches of woodchips or shredded bark mulch. Avoid mulching right up to the trunk of the tree as diseases can start there. Mulch has many benefits including keeping the soil moist and cool, moderating temperatures in the winter, and adding organic matter to the soil as it breaks down. In addition to this the mulched area will keep the tree from developing a well known disease we like to call "lawnmower blight"; the causal organism if you haven't guessed is your lawnmower or weed whip.

Water your tree once per week using a slow, thorough soaking. I like to advise that you water the root ball and not the planting hole. An inch of water per week is what the tree will need through the first growing season. Stake your tree loosely only if necessary. Depending on where the tree is located, how windy the area is, the soil conditions, and the size of the tree will dictate if you need to stake it. Never stake a tree so that it cannot move in the wind. Research has shown that when a tree sways in the wind it builds a stronger trunk. Make sure your tree can move around. Wait two or three years before adding fertilizer. The tree you have just planted needs to grow healthy roots. Too much fertilizer too soon will cause it to grow foliage at the expense of the roots. And lastly, wait to prune your new tree. It needs to produce sugars as efficiently as possible; the exception to this is if there are broken or diseased branches. Always remove these problems as soon as you see them.

When planting a tree remember the following: (M)id (W)est (W)inter (S)urvival – MULCH, WATER, WIDE, SHALLOW. If you have additional questions or comments feel free to contact me at 605-394-2188 or via email at ricky.abrahamson@sdstate.edu.

