

Fall Planting of Landscape Plants

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

It's the end of October. We're a full month into autumn, weather is getting cooler, but there's still a lot of things that you can do in your home landscape. When spring rolls around everyone has spring fever. Homeowners are busy little bees flitting around the yard doing this that and the other. Every store has a fresh shipment of landscape plants so everyone gets in the mood to start planting. Yet for many species of shrubs and trees, including fruit trees, fall can be as good if not a better time than spring to plant these woody plants.

Even though trees are going dormant, root growth is still occurring and likely will do so until soils really cool down. Additionally, root growth in trees starts much sooner in the spring (late winter) than many people realize. Planting woody plants in April and May can cause more transplant shock than planting in the fall. With fall planting the trees/shrubs really have a chance, with warm and moist soils, to get the root system settled in and growing before the tree goes totally dormant for the winter. Then, when that new growth starts in late February or early March, everything is in place and away it goes.

Some autumns are just too wet to really be planting trees and shrubs. The past few years this hasn't been the case. General rule of thumb anytime you are planting is that if the soil is so wet that you can easily form a mud ball that doesn't fall apart, it's probably too wet! Dig a hole twice as wide as the size of the root ball of what you are planting and just about as deep. You are essentially breaking up the soil around where the root ball is being planted so that the roots can more easily grow out. Most landscape plants, especially trees, do not have roots that go deep. Over 75% of a mature tree's root mass will be in the upper 24 to 30 inches of soil. Tree roots often go out twice as far, or further, than the ends of the branches. Therefore we want to create a favorable soil environment. We used to also recommend mixing a lot of organic matter into this soil region but we've now discovered that we're better off to just leave the soil texture well enough alone.

Plant the tree at the same depth as it was in the container or the top of the soil in the root ball if it was B&B (ball and burlap). With trees especially you also want to look to see if there are root flares starting to develop. You want this root flare to be right at the soil level. Sometimes when trees are repotted in nurseries to get them into a bigger pot they get set a little too deep so carefully brush away potting soil to find the root flares (where the tree trunk clearly flares out just above the actual roots) and get those flares set at soil surface level.

If the plant is in a container it is often helpful to take it out of the container just before planting and with a sharp knife slice down through the roots and soil about half way from the edge of the potting soil back to the trunk. If a tree has been in a container for a period of time you can get roots circling around the edge of the container that can continue to circle and wind up strangling the plant. Fix it before you start. Once the plant is in the ground, backfill with the soil you removed and then soak it down well to settle the soil around the roots. Keep the soil moist but not soggy!

While September and October are good months for fall planting you can continue well into November. Not all species do well with fall planting though. Beech, birch, redbud, magnolia, tulip poplar, willow oak, scarlet oak, black oak, willows, and dogwood should be planted in the spring.