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Fall is the Perfect Time for Tree Planting

Fall is almost here, which means... it's time to plant trees? While many people think of trees when the leaves start falling, few consider planting trees in the fall, instead opting for springtime when the trees will get the most rainfall. Fall is actually the best time to plant trees because the soil is still warm from the summer, which encourages root growth and establishment, and there are fewer weeds that emerge in the fall, giving freshly planted trees a leg up in the competition for water and nutrients.

Planting a tree has several steps, and the first (and arguably most important) is to choose the right species for your site. It is especially important to look up and consider how tall and wide the tree will get once mature, to ensure that it doesn't grow into any power lines or your house. Some catalogs or nurseries may have dwarf varieties of trees, but this does not always mean that the tree will remain small. Dwarf pecans will still grow to 30' tall and wide, but are listed as dwarf trees because this is about half the size of a traditional pecan tree. To get a better idea of how big your dwarf tree will grow, always compare it against a traditional-sized tree of the same species.

Sun is also a limiting factor in which trees will successfully grow in your landscape. Most trees require full sun to reach their max sizes, and some trees will completely fail if not given the sunlight they need for photosynthesis. If you cannot avoid planting in partial or full shade, look for trees that grow as understory trees in the wild. These trees typically grow under other, taller trees in their natural ecosystems, and include Redbuds, Pawpaws, Hornbeams, Serviceberries, and Maples.

When preparing the tree for planting, remove all wires, cords, and anything else tied to the plant. Leaving these materials on the tree has the potential to girdle the tree as it grows. Remove all containers from the root ball. Some ball and burlap trees will also have a wire basket around the root ball. You can remove this if you can do so without disturbing the root ball. However, research has shown that there is no considerable difference between trees that have had their cages removed and those that haven't. If there is a time lag between when you receive the tree and when you will plant it, keep the tree well-watered and in the shade. Move the tree by picking up the root ball and not the trunk.

Preparing the hole correctly will prevent future problems for your tree. Holes should be dug only as deep as the tree will sit. There is a point at the base of the trunk where the tree suddenly gets wider. This is called the root flare, and is where the roots begin. The hole you dig for the tree should never be deep enough to bury the root flare. Dig the hole three times as wide as the root ball to allow roots to grow outward faster. Once planted, water the tree thoroughly and then once a week for the first growing season. Holes should not be filled with any amendments like sand or peat moss, which can cause drainage issues. The only things that go into a hole are the tree and the soil that was originally removed.

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