

# Gardening Basics

## How to Plant a Tree



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Trees conserve energy, hold soil in place so reduce erosion and runoff into our watersheds, increase the value of a home, and improve the air we breathe. After selecting the type of tree you want in your landscape (see below\*), follow these tips to provide your tree with the greatest chance of thriving.

### Before you select a location

Know the location of underground utilities before you decide where the tree will be located. At least 2 business days before you start any digging project call 811 and this free service will notify appropriate utility companies to mark buried lines so you can safely dig around them.

<https://txgc.texas811.org/ui/ticket/homeowner>

Be sure you have enough space for the tree to grow to maturity. For instance, a tree with a mature trunk of 24-inch diameter will eventually have about a 40-foot wide crown.

Look up. If there are overhead power lines, be sure the mature height of the tree will fit underneath them. If not, you risk the utility company heavily pruning your tree in order to clear their lines. Move the tree **at least** 10-15 feet away from the foundation of the house, even more if it is a large species. Planting a tree in a flower bed adjacent to the home's walls may later cause foundation problems as well as obstruct a chimney, gutters, or other structures. The Texas A&M Forest Service's publication "Texas Tree Planting Guide" has valuable information for a successful placement:

<https://texastreeplanting.tamu.edu/TreePlantingTools.html>

### Preparing to plant the tree

1. Measure the height of the root ball and dig the hole slightly less than that and twice the width of the root ball.
2. If the tree is bare root, remove the ties and burlap.
3. Find the top-most root in the root ball. You may have to remove soil because nurseries often bury the top-most roots too deeply.
4. Inspect the root ball for circling or crossed roots. Cut or spread out circling roots.
5. Lift the tree by the root ball, not by the trunk, and set into the planting hole.
6. Position the top root 1 to 2 inches above the planting soil. It will eventually sink to be level.
7. Straighten the tree and look at it from two sides to ensure it is straight before filling the hole.
8. Use the original soil to fill the hole. Do not add amendments such as potting soil or compost.
9. Create a 3" tall berm of soil around the outer perimeter of the planting hole to create a 'saucer'.
10. Do not fertilize at planting time.

## Helping your new tree survive

- Fill the 'saucer' with water and allow the tree and soil to settle. Add soil if necessary but do not cover the flare.
- Add 3-4" of mulch in as big a circle as possible. Keep the mulch several inches away from the trunk.
- Turf and weeds rob trees of nutrients and water. It will perform better if it doesn't have to compete.
- Staking is not necessary unless it is a very windy location. Trees develop trunk strength by blowing in the wind. Remove the stakes in one year. Use padding or pieces of hose to protect the trunk from abrasion from ties and stakes. Remove immediately if they cause damage.

## Care of New Trees

It takes time for a newly planted tree to become established. Establishment involves growing roots to balance the amount of foliage. The reason to plant trees in fall and winter is so that the trees can grow roots while not having to put energy into growing leaves. The roots will continue to grow while the tree is dormant. A small tree may be fairly well established in 6-8 months, but a large caliper tree may take several years for the roots and foliage to become balanced again. Until then, give your new tree lots of TLC.

Two of the most common problems we see with newly planted trees are:

1. the tree is planted too deeply
2. it is under-watered.

Both are deadly. The problem with deep planting is that the root flare (where the trunk begins to flare out and the roots start) needs oxygen. Covering this area too deeply is like covering your mouth and nose. If this mistake has already been made, remove some of the soil until you can see the flare.

**Water** newly planted trees 2-3 times a week with a hose during first 1-2 years. Water 1 to 2 gallons per inch of caliper (diameter) of its trunk. Turning on the sprinkler is usually not enough. Gradually decrease watering to 1 time a week.

### Root flare exposed



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### Tree is too deep, and mulch should not be against the trunk



*Luana Vargas, Bugwood.org*

## Resources

Planting: How to Properly Plant a Tree, Texas A&M Forest Service, (accessed 19 March 2026):

<https://tfsweb.tamu.edu/TreePlanting/>

\*Texas A&M Tree Selector provides guidance for trees suitable for your Texas county, (accessed 19 March 2026):

<https://texastreeplanting.tamu.edu/>

Tree Placement, Master Gardener, Colorado State University Extension (accessed 19 March 2026):

<https://cmg.extension.colostate.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/59/2020/01/GN-630-Tree-Planting.pdf>