Gardening Basics

Trees – General Information

By far the most popular topic that the public asks for help with from our Garden Help Desk service is trees. Because there are a multitude of concerns to address, we've devoted many pages of our Gardening Basics Series as well as articles from our e-magazine, The Root, to aspects of tree ownership and care. See their links throughout this article.

Trees offer a long list of environmental, social, health, and economic benefits by:

- providing food and shelter for birds, wildlife, and humans
- producing oxygen
- sequestering carbon
- reducing pollution, drainage, and erosion problems
- screening out objectionable views and noise
- deflecting damaging wind, hail, and rain
- lessening energy costs with shade and windbreaks
- increasing property values with their beauty and stature



Mexican Plum Blossoms" by TexasEagle is licensed under CC BY-NC 2.0.

Site Planning

There are many considerations for where to place a tree in your landscape: sun exposure, foundations of structures, available irrigation, drainage patterns, overhead power lines, and many more.
Texas A&M Forest Service's "Tree Planting Tools" website is invaluable to guide you through these decisions:
https://texastreeplanting.tamu.edu/TreePlantingTools.html

During the planning process is a good time to initiate a soil test to ascertain current levels of nutrients.
See "**Fertilizing"** section below for information.

Selection

North Central Texas is partly in the Cross Timbers ecoregion and partly in the Blackland Prairie. Many types of trees are native to this area and thrive even under our challenging environmental conditions and soil types. Texas A&M Forest Service has an interactive guide for tree selection to help choose the right tree for a given location and landscaping purpose. Enter the conditions of the location you are considering for your tree (sunlight, mature height, etc.) to receive a list of suitable trees with descriptions that will do well. https://texastreeplanting.tamu.edu/CustomSelector.aspx
Other resources to assist you with achieving the "right plant, right place" for our area:
Texas SmartScape, https://www.txsmartscape.com/plant-search/ - North Central Texas Council of Governments
Trees for North Central Texas, https://www.wildflower.org/plants/ - Ladybird Johnson Wildflower Center
Trees Native to Denton County, https://www.npsot.org/chapters/trinity-forks/trinity-forks-resources/tf-what-to-plant/
Native Plant Society of Texas, Trinity Forks Chapter
Understanding Sunlight Requirements (Gardening Basics Series),
https://www.dcmga.com/garden-basics-understanding-sunlight-requirements/ – DCMGA

Various articles from DCMGA's e-magazine, The Root:
Afghan or Eldarica Pine, October 2018 – https://dcmga.com/root-2018-10#page=07
Possumhaw Holly, December 2018 – https://dcmga.com/root-2018-12#page=10
Redbud, April 2019 - https://www.dcmga.com/root-2019-04#page=11
Texas Mountain Laurel, March 2019 - https://dcmga.com/root-2019-03#page=10
Vitex, May 2022 - https://dcmga.com/root-2022-05#page=11

Be aware that some trees **should be avoided,** and although they may be for sale, they are considered invasive species. Texasinvasive.org at https://texasinvasives.org/invasives_database/ has this list to review before making a choice you will regret. Invasives spread aggressively beyond their native range, choking out natives on which wildlife depends.

Fruit/Nut Trees - For varieties recommended in North Texas, check out these resources:

- Fruit Trees for North Texas (Gardening Basics Series), https://www.dcmga.com/garden-basics-fruit-trees-north-texas/- DCMGA
- Native Pecans, https://dcmga.com/ah-pecans-native/ - AgriLife Texas Fruit & Nut Production
- Improved Pecans, https://dcmga.com/ah-pecans-improved/ - AgriLife Texas Fruit & Nut Production
- Fact sheets for many types of fruits and nuts, https://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/fruit-nut/ - AgriLife Texas Fruit & Nut Production

Dormant Season Fruit & Nut Spraying (Gardening Basics Series), https://dcmga.com/garden-basics-dormant-season-fruit-tree-spraying/ - DCMGA
Growing Citrus Trees in North Texas, from https://dcmga.com/root-2018-11#page=15 - DCMGA
Fruit & Nut Resources: Citrus, https://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/fruit-nut/fact-sheets/citrus/ - Texas A&M AgriLife

Picking a Tree at the Nursery

Depending on the species you want, trees are available from numerous sources, including local nurseries and plant sales held by gardening organizations. Remember, just because a plant is for sale here, it may not actually be well suited to our tough climate so do your research before you buy. Texas A&M Forest Service has good tips on what to look for when you go shopping: http://texastreeplanting.tamu.edu/PickTreeAtNursery.html The accompanying video is also a good reference. Pulling a tree out of its pot to check the condition is very important. If a retailer doesn't want you to do this or the tree has severely girdled (circling) roots, don't buy it. Trees may be sold as bare root (no soil covering the roots), as container grown (have always been in a pot), or field dug (grown in the ground and then dug up and the soil ball wrapped in order to facilitate moving). A large tree will experience more transplant shock and take longer to get established so a smaller tree that gets going quickly is often a better choice.

Planting

Probably the two most common causes of failure to thrive in trees are that they were planted incorrectly and not watered enough in the first year. Texas A&M Forest Service "Planting Trees in 12 Easy Steps": https://tfsweb.tamu.edu/arborday/plantingsteps/

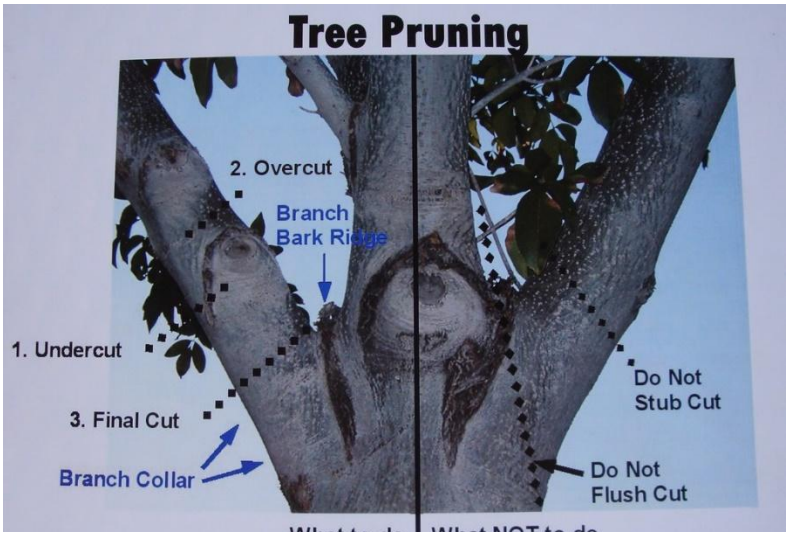
From DCMGA: How to Plant a Tree (Gardening Basics Series), https://dcmga.com/garden-basics-how-to-plant-trees/


Pam Spooner BY-NC-SA 4.0, Denton County MGA

Never plant a tree too deeply because the root flare (where the trunk flares out to the start of its main roots) must show above ground. When it looks like a phone pole, that's harmful to the tree's health. The bark needs air and the soil (or mulch piled up over the bark) traps moisture which softens the bark making it more vulnerable to disease or being chewed by pests hiding in the soil or under mulch. Newly planted trees need extra care with irrigation. See the **Watering** section below for a video link.

Tree Care

Pruning



Proper tree pruning was addressed at 2012 Arbor Day observance @ Palo Verde Park, Mesa." by Eileen M. Kane is licensed under CC BY 2.0.

For landscape shade trees, pruning is only necessary to remove dead, damaged, or rubbing limbs. Should you choose to prune for other reasons, remember that the tree does not require it. Trees need leaves in order to produce their energy, so be cautious before pruning. In particular, do not cut the top from a tree unless you want to permanently stunt its growth and ruin its natural shape. The most common victim is Crape Myrtle. Topping these trees is sometimes called crape murder. There are legitimate reasons for pruning, such as aesthetics, removal of damaged material, or slowly (over a period of years) removing a few lower branches in order to be able to mow underneath. Reducing shade so that grass will grow is not the best option for the tree. If it is too shady for grass, then planting a shade-tolerant ground cover is preferable to lifting the canopy by pruning off the limbs year after year. Ground covers can provide color and texture in the garden and are less work than grass!

Pruning is part art, part science and often completely confusing for homeowners. There are definite techniques for pruning properly, and thankfully, there is excellent advice to show you how. On DCMGA's YouTube channel are several videos about tree care: https://www.youtube.com/@DentonCountyMasterGardenerAsso

This guide from AgriLife's Earth-Kind® covers equipment, timing, and how to make pruning cuts correctly for trees but also for other plants like roses and shrubs, "Follow Proper Pruning Techniques":
https://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/earthkind/landscape/proper-pruning-techniques/

Fertilizing

Before fertilizing trees, lawn, or any other plant, find out what the soil actually needs. Our "Soil Testing (Gardening Basics Series" article explains the benefits and shows you how to get an analysis done: https://dcmga.com/garden-basics-soil-testing/ Most of the time, trees do not need supplemental fertilization. If you fertilize your lawn, that may be plenty for the trees as well. Do not fertilize an ailing tree as that only adds stress to its system. Get the problem properly diagnosed before performing any type of treatment, including fertilizer.

DCMGA's Understanding Fertilizer Labels (Gardening Basics Series) provides excellent info:
https://www.dcmga.com/garden-basics-understanding-fertilizer-labels/

Watering

As well as newly planted trees, long established trees in the landscape need water during periods of little rainfall, especially in hot weather. This "Tree Watering Tips" video from Texas A&M Forest Service will help you know when and how to water your trees: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ciEjYvwwQZs

Mulching

Mulch may be organic (bark chips, pine straw, etc.) or inorganic (pebbles, etc.). Mulching around trees results in many benefits to you and the tree. Regardless of the type of mulch chosen, be sure not to let it touch the bark of your tree

(leave a 6-8" space, like a donut) in order that the bark remains dry and prevents a handy hiding place for pests or diseases. This publication from Texas A&M AgriLife Earth-Kind® "Landscape Mulch" gives good advice:
https://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2010/10/mulch.pdf

From DCMGA:
All about Mulch (Gardening Basics Series): https://dcmga.com/garden-basics-all-about-mulch/
Leaves for Mulch & Compost (Gardening Basics Series): https://www.dcmga.com/gb-leaves-for-mulch-compost/

Storm Damage

"After the Storm: Can My Tree Be Saved?" webpage from Texas A&M Forest Service has excellent information and illustrations on pruning trees, plus help with decisions: https://tfsweb.tamu.edu/Canmytreebesaved/

What's Wrong with my Tree?

Because there are many causes for problems, please see "What's Wrong with My Tree?" (Gardening Basics Series):
https://www.dcmga.com/garden-basics-trees-whats-wrong/

Certified Arborists

We often suggest you consult a Certified Arborist to diagnose and treat the tree. It can be difficult for the average homeowner to care for an entire tree, particularly if it is large. You can find a Certified Arborist in your area by using the filters on the right side for your location: https://www.treesaregood.org/findanarborist/findanarborist/

"Hiring an Arborist", Texas A&M AgriLife Extension, Travis County, (accessed 30 October 2026):
https://travis-tx.tamu.edu/about-2/horticulture/ornamental-plants/trees-and-tree-care/hiring-an-arborist/

"Why Hire an Arborist." International Society of Arboriculture, (accessed 30 October 2026):
www.treesaregood.org/treeowner/whyhireanarborist.

Equal Opportunity Statement