

Community Forestry Assistant



Northwest
Management, Inc.

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Fall Tree Care Guide

For the past several years the retail nursery industry has promoted the idea that "Fall is for Planting." While I agree that in much of our country fall is an excellent time to plant trees and shrubs, in many cases I think the best use of fall time is "unplanting." Unplanting? OK, I am being a little tongue in cheek. I don't mean to literally dig a plant out of the ground. What I'm talking about is undoing and correcting mistakes that were made at planting time, whether it was earlier in the year or several years ago.

There are four areas where more follow-up care is needed: unstaking and untying, unwrapping, unmulching and unbinding.

■ Unstake and Untie

A tree needs staking at planting time only if it is unable to stand upright without one, or if it needs protection from wind or people. Assuming the tree needed staking (many don't), a year should be plenty of time. If its roots can't hold it up after that period, there's another problem involved, such as poor roots or soil conditions, that staking won't solve.

Unstaked, trees will develop trunk girth faster, and will also have the strength to keep their posture when hit by wind. Even when staked, trees should never be held rigidly in place.

Untie trees so that the material used to connect the stake to the tree doesn't "girdle" or damage the bark. Girdling restricts water and food movement in a tree and leads to a decline in growth. It might even create a weak spot above the girdle that could break off sometime later.



■ Unwrap

Remove any kind of trunk-protecting wrapping that was installed at planting time. Just as with unnecessary staking, there is unnecessary wrapping. In a few specific situations - trunk protection at digging or shipping time or heat protection if trees are planted into paved areas during the spring or summer - a wrap for less than a year may help. In most cases, however, wraps don't encourage trees to become established and may actually cause problems.

If a tree's trunk has been protected with a metal, plastic or other type of guard to prevent damage caused by machinery, animal feeding or vandalism, be sure it is loose. Otherwise, once again, tree-damaging girdling may occur at the guard site.

■ Unmulch

Don't remove all of the mulch, but if you or someone else has gotten overzealous, meaning there is a layer of mulch more than four inches thick against the trunk of any tree or shrub, pull some of it away. A three- to four-inch mulch layer is usually fine, but mulch against the trunk encourages bark decay or disease or insect problems. Excessive mulch can also create a welcoming habitat for animals such as voles that might feed on the base of plants.

While you're pulling the mulch at the base of your plants back, check to be sure that your trees and shrubs weren't planted too deeply. The trunk flare or root-stem transition area should be at the soil surface. If the tree is too deeply set and has been in place for just a short time - three to six months - dig it up and plant it less deeply. If that's not possible, remove soil from around the trunk base, gradually tapering back to grade.

■ Unbind

Be especially sure that any root packaging or balling materials were removed at planting time. These include natural jute or synthetic burlaps, natural hemp or synthetic ropes, the tops of wire baskets, plastic sleeves, even plastic pots. It's amazing how many of these materials are left intact at transplant time, and how quickly they can limit root growth and plant establishment or cause stem girdling. Even the tops of "plantable" peat-paper-fiber pots should be broken away. Their slow rate of biodegradation often limits root development and the fibers can hinder moisture infiltration to the roots.

-Article was excerpted from "Fall Tree Care" written by Bonne Lee Appleton and published by the National Gardening Association in 2000.