

How to Plant a Tree or Shrub



1. Prepare the planting hole. Dig your planting hole 2 to 3 times wider than the current root mass. Use your spade to measure the depth of the root mass and dig no deeper than that depth. Disturbing the soil deeper may cause the soil to settle and the tree to sink.

- *Trees: The best way to check the depth is to find the root flare. The root flare is the area at the base of the trunk where the roots and trunk meet. This area is often found under the burlap on balled & burlapped trees. This area on the tree needs to be kept above your planting hole and should not be covered by any soil. When covered, the tree will decline and will eventually die. On average, when placed in the planting hole, the top 1/3 of the rootball should be above the surrounding soil.*

2. Inspect the root system. When planting containerized trees and shrubs, be sure to inspect the root system. Often the roots will grow in a circular pattern, and it is important to stop this pattern, so it doesn't continue after planting. To do this, break up the pattern by using your hands to rough up the sides. In more severe cases, slice the roots with a knife or pruning saw and cut the bottom inch off.

The burlap and wire basket that surrounds the rootball should be left in place until you place it in the planting hole. At that time, cut off the rope and cut off the burlap to the edge of the ball, exposing the top. The top of the basket can either be folded back or cut off.

3. Soil Amendments. Compost adds nutrients and aids in drainage. Adding compost is recommended if you intend on amending the entire area that a plant's roots will grow.

However, research has shown that when planting an individual tree or shrub, you should not amend the hole with organic matter. Roots growing in amended soil will often stay within that hole and not grow into the existing, native soil. This will create a smaller root system that can reduce the plant's growth and create an unstable tree as the tree grows, making it susceptible to wind and storms. When backfilling the hole, break up clumps of existing soil and remove any rock or debris. Because the top of your tree's root mass is above ground, taper the soil up to cover all the roots.

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4. Eliminate Air Pockets. To guarantee good soil-to-root contact, backfill halfway and add water to the hole. Water in completely once you've backfilled your planting hole and have added mulch around the base.

5. Don't prune or cut back any branches after planting except those that are rubbing or damaged.

Leaf buds release a hormone that encourages root growth. If the branches and, by default, leaf buds are removed, fewer roots will be formed.