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News Release

“MythBusters” in planting fall shrubs and trees

Question: I am planning on planting some trees and shrubs this fall and would appreciate some planting tips to insure success.

Answer: Normally I get questions after newly planted trees and shrubs start to die, but I much prefer offering pre-planting advice to avoid problems.

Fall is the best time to plant most perennial plants including trees and shrubs and even many cold hardy herbaceous perennials. The keys to success start well before planting. It is always advisable to do a little research on the front end.

There are some important questions you should answer before planting anything. First, are the plants I have in mind adapted to our climate? Plants that are well adapted to our winter are one thing but we also need to be concerned about plants being well adapted to our heat. Second, will the plants tolerate the drainage or lack of drainage within my soil? Poor drainage causes more plant death in heavy clay soils than drought does. Third, is the site chosen adequate for continued growth of the chosen plants? You should always think about the mature size when choosing the planting location and plant material.

The actual planting process will determine in large part the future growth and possibly whether or not a plant survives at all. There are at least two myths about planting woody plants that may reduce your chance of success.

The first myth is that you should amend the planting hole with loose organic matter. If you have a lot of clay in your soil you should not use any organic soil amendments. There are several potential problems with adding organic matter and they all revolve around water. If organic matter is added to a hole surrounded by heavy clay soil, the water movement is drastically altered. You will have one of two problems. Either the water will not move out of the hole after rainfall, causing a stopped up drain effect, or the organic matter will dry and not re-wet well. Both of these scenarios will lead to root death. Plant wilting is not always a good indicator of whether the soil is too dry because drought and excessive water both cause plants to wilt.

The second myth is that you should not disturb the root ball coming out of the container. This myth relates to the previous myth, but needs some further explanation. Most plants are grown in containers at the nursery in a very light ground pine bark mix. This mix is great for growing shrubs and trees in the nursery but can present terrible problems in the landscape. If this loose bark is allowed to remain intact, the water movement issues described above still apply, with the added problem of air pocket development around the roots as the bark decomposes. Therefore, it is best to gently wash most of the loose bark material off the plant until it is, for all practical purposes, a bare root plant. This may involve pulling the roots out if they have started winding around the root ball. If necessary you can prune or slice these roots to help make this job easier, but try to leave as many roots intact as possible.

The planting hole should be shallow and wide. The depth only needs to be as deep as the root ball, but the hole should be at least two times the width of the root spread. Look for the uppermost lateral root to determine the planting depth. This lateral root should be at grade or slightly above the surrounding soil grade. Make a small ring of raised soil to hold water near where the outermost roots extend. Keep this area moist at all times for the first several weeks and then gradually decrease watering frequency and increase watering depth to encourage deeper rooting. Mulching the root area can give you a false sense of security about whether the plant has adequate water. It is very important to check the root area frequently to avoid drying. Do not apply mulch more than a couple inches thick.

A couple other post plant care tips are to keep the area around trees and shrubs weed and grass free, widening the weed free area as the plant grows. Also, avoid using weed whackers or mowers near the plant base.

For more information on this topic or other horticulture related questions, please contact Regional Extension Agent Tony Glover at the St. Clair County Extension office at (205) 338-9416 or email gloveta@aces.edu.