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News Release

Fall is for Planting

Question: I lost several trees during the spring tornado outbreak. I would like to replace them this fall. Is now the right time? Can you give some proper planting techniques?

Answer: As we all know, the April 2011 tornadoes wreaked havoc across our state. Many of our large mature shade trees are nothing more than fond memories, and unfortunately, a lot of people find themselves facing the same challenge as you.

Trees provide many benefits, not only aesthetically, but environmentally and economically as well. They are the anchors of the landscape and provide sanctuary for wildlife. They also help to purify our air and lend their great canopies to shade our homes.

Fall is the prime time to plant trees. However, there are several factors to consider before the shovel breaks the ground.

- First, are the desired plants adapted to our climate? You should consider not only the cold, but also our relentless Southern heat.
- Secondly, will your chosen area facilitate continued growth of the plant? Are there height and width concerns for the area that you have chosen? You should always consider the mature size of your selection when choosing the area to plant.
- Thirdly, how well does the soil drain in the selection site? If the drainage leaves a little to be desired, will your plant selection tolerate wet or damp soil?

“Variety is the spice of life.” This thought can be applied to our landscapes as well. Use a variety of tree species to make your landscape visually more interesting. It is also a helpful in combatting future pests and weather events.

Bigger is not always better. After you have decided what to plant, you should consider the initial size of that plant. There are several benefits to planting smaller trees (1-3” diameter at base of trunk).

- First, they are less expensive. Your patience can save a substantial amount of money.
- Secondly, they are easier to plant - the least amount of “sweat equity”, the better, right?
- Thirdly, a smaller tree takes less time to become established in its new home.

Ready to plant? Not just yet. Soil improvement and preparation are critical in getting your new trees off to a good start. Conducting a soil test is very economical (\$7.00) and will provide valuable information regarding soil fertility and pH. You can find soil testing information at the St. Clair county Extension office or you can visit the Auburn University Soil Testing Lab website at www.aces.edu/anr/soillab. One other note of importance – before you dig, ALWAYS call 811 to locate water and utility lines.

Now, you can get your hands dirty. Trees should be planted in large, wide holes rather than in narrow deep ones. The depth needs to be only as deep as the root ball, but the hole should be at least two times the width of the root ball. Look for the uppermost lateral root (also known as the root flare) to determine the proper planting depth. This root flare should be at grade or slightly above the surrounding soil grade. The planting hole should be backfilled with loosened native soil.

A consistent watering regimen is essential to the success of your new trees. After planting, add water slowly every day or two at a rate of about 2 gallons per inch of trunk diameter. After a month or so, you should decrease the watering frequency, but increase the volume of water applied to encourage deeper root growth. You may need to water for the first six months or even a year, depending on the size of the tree and the time of year you plant.

There are a couple more post-plant tips to consider. Fertilization and pruning are usually not required the first year except to remove dead, rubbing or broken limbs. Also, make sure to keep the area around the trees weed and grass free. This can be done by applying 2-3 inches of mulch in a ring around the tree, being sure to avoid direct contact with the trunk.

The following is a list of websites that you may find helpful. Happy Gardening!

- Urban and Community Forestry Information - www.aces.edu/ucf/
- Alabama Smart Yards - www.aces.edu/pubs/docs/A/ANR-1359/ANR-1359.pdf

For more information about this topic please contact Bethany O’Rear, Regional Extension Agent-Home Grounds, Gardens and Home Pests at the St. Clair County Extension Office at (205) 338-9416 or email bao0004@aces.edu.