

Danny L. Cain
Walker County Extension Agent
1501 North Airport Rd
Jasper AL 35504
(205)221-3392

For Publication in *The Daily Mountain Eagle*

Thinking about sprucing up your landscape by adding a few trees and shrubs or perhaps replacing some of your landscape plants damaged during the storms from the past few weeks? There is no better time than the present. In fact the month of October is the best time of year to plant woody-stemmed trees and ornamentals.

There are many reasons why October is the best planting month. First and foremost is the fact that during the fall and early winter your plant's shoot or green leafy growth slows down while root growth increases. The increased rate of root growth ensures that your plants will have time to establish a healthy root system before next summer's hot dry weather. There is an old saying that goes "as the roots go so goes the top". Simply put that means that plants will not grow, flower, or produce fruit without first having a healthy root system no matter how well you care for your plants.

During October as the weather begins to cool, the rate of transpiration in the plant slows down. Transpiration refers to the amount of water taken up by the roots that is lost through its leaves. Also less soil moisture is lost through evaporation.

Finally, weather conditions and the relative lack of lush tender new growth greatly reduce your plant's chances of being damaged by fungal diseases. Combine the rapid fall root growth, reduced water loss through evaporation and transpiration, and lower disease pressure and it's no wonder that fall is such a great time to plant.

If you choose to plant an entire bed area, begin by applying a two to three inch layer of organic matter such as peat moss, ground pine bark, leaf mold, or compost to the top of soil. The organic matter should then be worked into the soil to a depth of eight to ten inches.

The process is a bit different if you are planting a single tree or shrub. For single plantings, begin by digging a hole at least three times the diameter of the plant you are planting. This will allow the root system plenty of room in which to grow and expand. You should make the hole no deeper than the original root ball; in fact, you should make the hole about an inch shallower than the root ball to allow for settling. Another old saying goes "never put a \$10 plant in a \$2 hole". The sides of the hole should be tapered outward

from bottom to top instead of straight up and down to allow the roots to grow into the soil. Soil amendments are generally not required for individual plantings.

Place the plant in the center of the hole, and using the native soil, refill the hole one-half to two-thirds full. Gently tamp the soil downward and under the plant to remove any air pockets that can deprive your plant of moisture. Fill the hole with water to further remove air pockets. With the remaining soil finish filling the hole but do not firm or tamp. Apply a two or three inch layer of mulch such as pine straw to help hold moisture and insulate the root system.

Most plants sold in local nurseries and garden center are either containerized, bare root, or balled and burlapped. Each should be handled just a little bit differently.

Containerized plants suffer much less “transplant shock” than do other plants and thus usually have a higher survival rate. The main problem with containerized plants is that they sometimes become pot-bound which means they have a mass of small feeder roots growing around the outside of the root ball from their lengthy stay in their pots. The first rule of handling containerized plants is to handle the plant by the container and do not pick the plant up by the stem. The container should be carefully removed prior to planting. Once the container is removed you can loosen up the roots growing along the side and bottom of the plant. Loosening the roots in this manner will not hurt the plant and in fact will allow the roots to grow outward into the soil instead of continuing to grow around in circles.

Containerized plants usually come in a variety of sizes (one gallon, three gallon, seven gallon, or even larger). This will allow you to select plants that will fit your budget. The larger the container, the more expensive they will be. The ultimate full size of the plant will not change, you will just have to be a little more patient with the plant while it reaches its mature size.

Bare root plants tend to suffer the most from “transplant shock” and must be handled with care. Store your bare root plants in a shady area and keep them moist until they are ready to be planted. Here is another simple rule to remember regarding the roots of bare root plants...”if they dry, they will die”. Prior to planting you should soak the roots in water and then carefully spread the root system out and plant at a six-inch depth. Unlike containerized plants, the proper time to plant bare root plants is during the colder dormant months.

Balled and burlapped plants have their root system and some surrounding soil wrapped in burlap, hence the name. It is not necessary to remove the burlap if it is actually burlap and not plastic or synthetic

material. Natural burlap will decompose on its own in the soil. It is a good idea to make some slits in the sides of the burlap to allow for outward root growth. Do not allow any of the burlap to stick out above the surface of the soil as it will serve as a wick and draw moisture away from the plant roots. It is best to loosen the burlap and fold it away from the roots into the bottom of the hole.

One additional thing to watch out for with balled and burlapped plants is to make sure that any strapping, rope, or strings that are attached as they will girdle the plant as it grows. I have seen numerous instances when homeowners or even landscapers forgot to remove the strapping from balled and burlapped plants with not so good results.

After planting, remember that the single most important nutrient that your new plant will need is water. Many plants can take up to a full year before they become fully established. Slowly water your new plants to a depth of about eight inches every seven days or so in absence of natural rainfall throughout its first year. Failure to do this often causes the new plant to suffer stress that can be severe enough to kill it. I receive numerous calls every year with the same problem.... My new tree greened up fine in the early spring and suddenly died this summer. Transplant shock from improper planting and lack of watering kills more trees, shrubs, and even bedding plants than disease and insect damage combined.