Every tree, large or small, began as a small seedling. Just as generations before us planted and nurtured trees that we enjoy today, we can have a major impact on our communities for years to come by helping replace trees lost in the storms. This brochure offers tips for making wise plant choices, proper planting techniques, and early care of the new trees you plant in your landscape.

Right Plant – Right Place

Consider all of the factors when selecting the best tree for each location. A tree should be suited to the location’s light exposure, soil drainage, soil chemistry, and available space. Think about both the above- and below-ground space needed for the mature canopy and root system of the tree.

Trees provide more than beauty. They give us a sense of history and well-being, make our communities more livable, provide habitat for wildlife, and shade our homes, helping us save money on utility bills.

Plant a mixture of tree species. Avoid overuse of any one type, so your landscape will be visually interesting and so it can better weather both storms and future pest outbreaks. For recommendations, check the websites at the end of this brochure, consult a local arborist or Extension horticulturist or nursery person, or visit one of the many arboretums or botanical gardens around the state.

When you have decided which tree to plant, think small—one to three inches in diameter at the base. Small trees are less expensive, easier to plant, and require less time to establish.
Soil improvement and preparation as well as proper planting space are critical for a good start and long-term tree health. A soil analysis is only $7 and provides valuable information to help you select trees and learn what soil nutrient and pH adjustments are needed. Find soil testing information at your county Extension office or visit the Auburn University Soil Testing Lab website at www.aces.edu/anr/soillab. Always call 811 to locate water and utility lines.

When your hole is dug, spread the root system out laterally. Cut circling roots that could grow around and girdle the tree trunk in the future. Set plants at the proper depth by finding the uppermost lateral root and keep it at or near the soil surface. For container-grown plants, wash and remove most of the organic mix from the root ball to expose the root system and to make needed root corrections. Remove the top third of burlap from balled and burlapped bags, or if the bag is made from a synthetic material, remove as much of the bag as possible.

A well-made planting hole

2-3 inches of mulch
Backfill with loosened native soil
Root flare
Hole widens at top, gradually opening
Burlap

You may need to water for six months or even a year, depending on the size of the tree and the time of year you plant. Fertilization and pruning are not usually necessary the first year except to remove dead, rubbing, or broken limbs. Finally, create a weed- and grass-free mulch ring around the tree to protect it from string trimmer and lawn mower damage. Apply about 3 inches of mulch in a ring around the plant, but avoid direct contact with the trunk.

After-Planting Care

With an adequate watering schedule, container-grown trees can be planted at any time. But the best times to plant in Alabama, especially for balled and burlapped or bare root trees, are fall and winter. Planting in fall or early winter reduces planting stress and water needs compared to planting in warmer seasons.

Watering is critically important at any planting time. When a tree is first planted, add water slowly every day or two at a rate of about 2 gallons per inch of trunk diameter. After a few weeks, decrease the frequency but increase the volume and expand it to a wider area to encourage wide-spreading roots.

For more information, call your county Extension office. Look in your telephone directory under your county’s name to find the number.

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Helpful Websites

“Street Trees: Site Selection, Planting, and Maintenance in the Urban Landscape”
www.aces.edu/pubs/docs/A/ANR-0814/

Alabama Smart Yards
Urban and Community Forestry Information
Tree Identification
The Morton Arboretum: Tree Care and Advice
Urban Tree Selection
“Trees and Shrubs for Overhead Utility Easements”
Auburn University Soil Testing Lab
Alabama Cooperative Extension System
(to find the Extension office nearest you to speak with a professional horticulturist)