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TEN RULES FOR PLANTING TREES

Before you begin spring landscaping, here are some tips on planting trees.

1. Select the right tree for the site. To avoid serious problems, choose trees that are adapted to your location. Consider whether the tree produces nuisance fruit or if there are disease-resistant varieties available. For example, there are a number of crabapple varieties that are resistant to apple scab and rust diseases. Also consider the mature size to be sure you have enough room.
2. Keep the tree well watered and in a shady location until planting. When moving the tree, lift it by the root ball or pot and not by the trunk.
3. Before planting, remove all wires, labels, cords or anything else tied to the plant. If left on, they may eventually girdle the branch to which they are attached. The root flare (point where trunk and roots meet) should be visible. If it isn't, remove enough soil or media so that it is.
4. Dig a proper hole. Make the hole deep enough so that the tree sits slightly above nursery level. Plant the tree on solid ground, not fill dirt. In other words, don't dig the hole too deep and then add soil back to the hole before placing the tree. The width of the planting hole is very important. It should be three times the width of the root ball. Loosening the soil outside the hole so it is five times the diameter of the root ball will allow the tree to spread its roots faster.
5. Remove all containers from the root ball. Cut away plastic and peat pots; roll burlap and wire baskets back into the hole, cutting as much of the excess away as possible. If you can remove the wire basket without disturbing the root ball, do it. If roots have been circling around in the container, cut them and spread them out so they do not continue growing so that they circle inside the hole and become girdling roots later in the life of the tree.
6. Backfill the hole with the same soil that was removed. Amendments such as peat moss likely do more harm than good. Make sure the soil that goes back is loosened - no clods or clumps. Add water as you fill to ensure good root to soil contact and prevent air pockets. There is no need to fertilize at planting. Note: Adding organic matter to larger area than just the planting hole can be beneficial, but it must be mixed in thoroughly with the existing soil. However, adding amendments to just the planting hole in heavy soil creates a "pot" effect that can fill with water and drown your new tree.
7. Don't cut back the branches of a tree after planting except those that are rubbing or damaged. The leaf buds release a hormone that encourages root growth. If the tree is cut back, the reduced number of leaf buds results in less hormone released and therefore fewer roots being formed.
8. Water the tree thoroughly and then once a week for the first season if there is insufficient rainfall.
9. Mulch around the tree. Mulch should be 2 to 4 inches deep and cover an area two the three times the diameter of the root ball. Mulching reduces competition from other plants, conserves moisture and keeps soil temperature closer to what the plants' roots prefer.
10. Stake only when necessary. Trees will establish more quickly and grow faster if they are not staked. However, larger trees or those in windy locations may need to be staked the first year. Movement is necessary for the trunk to become strong. Staking should be designed to limit movement of the root ball rather than immobilize the trunk.

Fruit Tree Pruning Workshop

For those who have fruit trees - or want to have fruit trees - a free community workshop on tree pruning will be held at the Numana Community Garden on Gordy Street, between 6th St. And 9th St. in El Dorado. The workshop will be held at 10 a.m. Friday, March 17th. Larry Crouse, Butler County Extension horticulture agent, will lead this hands-on training. Dress appropriately, there will not be a rain-out date. Pruning is essential for a tree to thrive and produce abundant fresh fruit. Participants will learn how to set the base structure of an apple or peach tree and the reasons behind pruning. Crouse will discuss pest control problems that fruit growers encounter. After a demonstration, Crouse and other Butler County Master Gardeners will supervise as participants try their hand. Participants will want to bring their own pruning tools, bypass pruners are preferred over anvil type. Hand shears and loppers are the tools of choice. The apple orchard used in this workshop is part of the Numana Community Garden. These fruit trees will provide fresh fruit for people in need in our community. There is no cost for this tree pruning workshop. Any questions about this event can be answered by calling the Butler County Extension office at (316) 321-9660.

Adding Organic Matter in the Spring

Organic matter is a good way to improve garden soil as it improves a heavy soil by bettering tilth, aeration and how quickly the soil absorbs water. However, organic matter added in the spring should be well decomposed and finely shredded/ground. Manures and compost should have a good earthy smell without a hint of ammonia. Add a 2-inch layer of organic matter to the surface of the soil and work the materials into the soil thoroughly. Be sure soils are dry enough to work before tilling as wet soils will produce clods.

To determine if a soil is too wet to work, grab a handful and squeeze. If water comes out, it is much too wet. Even if no water drips out, it still may not be dry enough to work. Push a finger into the soil you squeezed. If it crumbles, it is dry enough, but if your finger just leaves an indentation, more time is needed. Be sure to take your handfuls of soil from the depth you plan to work the soil because deeper soils may contain more moisture than the surface.

Managing Turf in Shade

Turfgrasses differ in their capacity to grow in shade. Among Kansas turfgrasses, tall fescue is the best adapted to shade though it isn't all that good. Although the fine fescues (i.e., creeping red, chewings, hard and sheep) have better shade tolerance, they lack heat tolerance and typically decline during hot Kansas summers. The warm-season grasses have the poorest shade tolerance, although zoysia does better than Bermuda or buffalo. Where shade is too heavy for fescue, there are other courses of action. The most obvious is to either remove trees, or to prune limbs and thin the tree canopies. Grass will do better under openly spaced trees than under closely spaced trees. Pruned limbs and thinned canopies will allow more sunlight to directly reach the turfgrass. If possible, raise the mowing height in the shade to compensate for the more upright growth of the leaves, and to provide more leaf area for photosynthesis. The thin, weak turf in the shade may tempt you to fertilize more.

Remember, the problem is lack of light, not lack of fertility. Too much nitrogen in the spring causes the plant to grow faster and may result in weak plants. The nitrogen rate for shaded grass should be cut back to at least half of that for grass in full sun. Late fall fertilization after tree leaves have fallen, on the other hand, is important for shaded cool-season turfgrasses and should be applied at a full rate. Irrigate infrequently but deeply. Light, frequent irrigation may encourage tree feeder-roots to stay near the surface, which increases competition between the trees and the turf. Restrict traffic in the shade.

Many times, the best choice for shaded areas is switch from a turfgrass to a more shade-tolerant plant. For example, English ivy, winter creeper euonymus and periwinkle (Vinca minor) are much more shade tolerant than any turfgrass adapted to our area. Another option is simply to mulch the area where turf doesn't grow well. The trees will love the cool, moist soil and the absence of competition.