Plant a tree correctly for Arbor Day

Arbor Day is a nationally-celebrated observance that encourages tree planting and care. In Florida, Arbor Day is always celebrated on the third Friday in January. So celebrate Arbor Day by planting a tree.

Planting and establishing trees is all about managing air and moisture in the soil. One of the most common causes of poor plant establishment or tree death is planting too deep. To ensure that your tree will thrive, follow this ten step planting procedure.

Step one—look up. If there is a wire, security light, or building nearby that could interfere with proper development of the tree canopy as it grows, plant it elsewhere or plant a tree that has a small canopy at maturity.

Step two—dig a shallow but wide planting hole. To estimate the depth of the planting hole, measure the distance between the point where the topmost root emerges from the trunk and the bottom of the root ball. Dig a hole slightly shallower than this distance. If the hole was inadvertently dug too deep, add soil to the bottom of the hole and compact it with your foot. Make the hole at least 1½ times the diameter of the root ball.

Step three—find the topmost root and treat root defects. Choose a tree whose topmost root emerges from the trunk visibly, at or slightly above the surface. Not all root balls come from the nursery like that. If you cannot see the topmost root, remove excess soil to expose it before you plant the tree. Cut or spread out any circling or kinked roots. This will prevent these roots from strangling the trunk in the future.

Step four—carefully place the tree into the planting hole. To avoid damage, lift the tree with straps or rope around the root ball. Do not lift it by the trunk.

Step five—position the topmost root slightly above (about 2 inches) the top of the landscape soil. Most horticulturists agree that it is better to plant a tree too high than to plant it too deep.

Step six—straighten the tree in the hole. Before you begin backfilling, have someone view the tree from two directions perpendicular to each other to confirm the tree is straight.

The Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS) is an Equal Opportunity Institution authorized to provide research, educational information, and other services only to individuals and institutions that function with non-discrimination with respect to race, creed, color, religion, age, disability, sex, sexual orientation, marital status, national origin, political opinions, or affiliations. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Cooperative Extension Service, University of Florida, IFAS, Florida A&M University Cooperative Extension Program, and Boards of County Commissioners Cooperating.
Step seven—remove all synthetic materials such as string, rope, synthetic burlap or other materials.

Step eight—add backfill and firm the backfill soil. Slice a shovel down into the backfill 20 to 30 times all around the tree as you add backfill soil. Do not pack the backfill, instead step lightly on the backfill soil to help stabilize the root ball. Do not over-pack the loosened soil, especially when the soil is wet.

Add 10 to 20 gallons of water to the root ball. Fill in any holes or depressions with additional backfill soil. Do not firmly pack backfill soil in an attempt to eliminate air pockets because this could cause too much soil compaction, especially in clay soil.

Step nine—cover the sides of the root ball with mulch. Provide a 3-inch deep layer of mulch around the tree. Generally, a 2 to 3 foot diameter circle of mulch per inch of tree trunk diameter will be adequate for newly planted trees. Avoid placing mulch, or soil, on top of the rootball.

Step ten—stake the tree if necessary to hold the root ball firmly in the soil. If the root ball moves in the wind, emerging roots could break and trees will establish slowly.

For more detailed instructions or to choose appropriate trees for your area, contact your local Extension Service.

Theresa Friday is the Environmental Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.

For additional information on County Extension Services and other articles of interest go to http://santarosa.ifas.ufl.edu.

###