

EAC - Taking Care Of Your Trees by Mary Westervelt, Tredyffrin EAC

You know that trees are good for the environment. Maybe you chose your home partly because of the trees, but now you may be replacing trees that were lost due to storm damage or construction. Help your trees thrive and maximize their ecological benefits by following these tips.

Planting trees

The right tree for the right site. Take time to learn about what trees work best in your soil. Look up information about any tree you consider planting: Is it suited to your type of soil? Will it thrive with this area's usual amounts of rainfall? What about the tree's mature size? Don't plant a tree that will grow to 90 feet near your house or to power lines!

Early care ensures good survival. Tree Tenders cites two major reasons for failure of young trees to get established: Planting too deeply, and watering too little. For detailed video guidelines, go to the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society Tree Tenders Youtube videos, 'Planting a Container Tree' and 'Planting a Bareroot Tree'.

Planting too deeply. A tree trunk ends in a root flare. The root flare should be **above** the soil line. Soil (or bark mulch) piled against the trunk of the tree encourages surface roots instead of the deep roots the tree needs. Even worse, microorganisms, insects, and burrowing rodents will attack the cambium, or nutrient-carrying layer, of the tree trunk if soil is piled against it. Root structure is made to be in contact with soil; trunk structure is not.



Over 4 inches of mulch removed, and still not down to the root flare! Note the roots circling the trunk. If left, they could grow to strangle the tree. (Photo by Anne Murphy)

Watering too little in the first two years.

Yes, we live in a climate with adequate annual precipitation, but it may not fall when your tree needs it! A transplanted tree has probably suffered some damage to the tiny roots that bring in moisture and nutrients. You need to make sure the soil stays moist during the first two years, while the tree rebuilds a healthy root system. The

Pennsylvania Horticultural Society (PHS) recommends watering with at least 10 gallons per week (up to 15 in a city situation where much of the soil is covered with pavement), preferably delivered slowly to the base of the tree. If it rains, you might be able to supply less extra water. Check the soil to be sure. And, if there's a warm spell in the winter, be sure to water your new tree.

Ongoing care

Care throughout the life of the tree is important for maintaining the tree's health. Follow these pointers for ongoing care of a tree: Mulch correctly, skip the lawn under the tree, and protect your tree from deer (and weed whackers).

Yes to mulch, no to mowing! It's important to keep the soil below the tree moist and uncompacted. Mulch in the form of shredded leaves or roots (no dye, please!) helps control weeds, keep the soil moist, and maintain the structure of the soil. As the mulch breaks down, it feeds the soil as well.

Say NO to Mulch Volcanoes! Go for a walk in the woods. Notice how trees grow in the wild. They never have 'volcanoes' of soil or mulch mounded around the trunks! Keep the mulch AWAY from the trunk of the tree! See the warning against 'planting too deeply' above. Mounding mulch around the trunk is as bad as planting too deeply.



Mulch volcano around a tree in a Tredyffrin parking lot. The mulch is compacted and full of roots, so it's very hard to scrape away. (Photo by Anne Murphy)

PHS recommends the 3-3-3 rule for proper mulching: 3 inches away from the trunk, no more than 3 inches deep, and extend the mulch to about 3 feet out from the tree. (For mature trees, you can even mulch out to the 'drip' line - the extent of the branches, which is the likely extent of the roots as well.)

What about having lawn under the tree? As PHS says, 'Say No to Grass!' Turfgrass is not natural in our area, and it requires heavy input of chemicals to be kept green. Those chemicals damage the soil in ways that make it harder for trees (and other plants) to grow. Cutting the grass, especially with heavy

tractor mowers, compacts the soil. Mowers, weed whippers, and other lawn-care equipment run into trees, damaging the bark and letting in disease and insects.



The healthy root flare of a tree surrounded with a mix of native and non-native ground-cover plants. The twigs and leaves add nutrients to the soil. No need to run the mower under this tree. (Photo by Mary Westervelt)

Protect trees from deer. In our area, young trees must be caged to protect them from deer. Saplings will be browsed if they are not caged or sprayed with deer repellent. Older trees, up to about five inches in diameter, attract bucks looking for a good place to rub the velvet off their antlers. Buck rub can result in so much bark damage that it kills the tree.

Give your new trees a good start and continue providing the basic care needed to ensure that they contribute to the beauty of your property and to your property's environmental value.

Don't put your leaves out on the curb! Use them as mulch under your trees, shrubs, and on your perennial beds. Here's how: When leaves fall, rake them onto the lawn and run over them with a mower (NOT a tractor mower). Your mower may even have a mulch plug to help grind up the leaves. Then, rake the leaves to where they can serve as mulch. You can rake the leaves onto a tarp and drag them to where they are needed to save labor.

You can also add the shredded leaves to your compost pile and use the composted leaves in the spring. However, keep some leaves in their shredded state on your property. Many butterfly and moth larva over-winter in leaf mulch. If you remove it or compost all of it, you may reduce the number of beneficial insects on your property.

Jenkins Arboretum and Gardens in Devon actually collects leaves from neighbors, runs over them with a mower, and bags them to use throughout the year as mulch. Take a tip from the local pros - those leaves are what your landscape needs!