



Five Common Problems with Tree Health

Addressing these common problems while planting or caring for your tree will help reduce disease and promote health growth in your landscape!

Here is a quick summary of these 5 common problems:

- Planting in the wrong soil
- Planting a tree that is too mature
- Lack of organic matter
- Weed trimmer damage
- Too much grass

Planting in the wrong soil

Here in the Midwest US, we have heavy clay soils. Too often I see trees planted in a new development in compacted clay, no topsoil. These trees usually hang on and struggle for a few years, sometimes lasting 15 years or so. But these trees commonly have disease issues or end up dying slowly.

Make sure the tree you plant is adapted well to your *local* soil on your site. This may mean that natives aren't always the best, because they may be adapted to your regional soil with healthy topsoil.

As an example, if you live in a new development where the topsoil was removed and you're left with compacted clay from heavy equipment, consider a tree that develops a strong taproot and can withstand poor soils. A good example would be a honey locust (*Gleditsia triacanthos*).

Alternatively, if you live in a region with very sandy soils, consider a tree that thrives in drought conditions and develops wide, fibrous roots to absorb moisture over a large surface. Examples include trees in the Mesquite (*Prosopis*) genus, Southern Live Oak (*Quercus virginianus*), and many Mediterranean trees, depending on your climate.

Solutions:

For planning, you can pick a different tree!

If you already have a tree planted, often the best solution is to nurse the tree with organic matter.

Top-dressing with compost a few times annually will help provide nutrients and water retention to the tree. Make sure to top dress within the whole root zone, which often extends as wide as or even beyond the canopy.

Adding various mulches depending on the tree type is also helpful. Try to avoid the colored wood mulch, which may contain treated lumber scraps as well as dyes that may inhibit growth. Leaf mulches are generally very healthy for a tree - think of where they originally evolved.

Planting a tree that is too mature

We often get excited to plant a big tree so it gets a head start. Oddly enough, we are most often doing more harm than good.

When we plant a mature tree, we often get them potted or burlapped. Both ways require extensive root pruning to make the tree manageable. Getting a medium-sized or large tree is very expensive to get a large enough root zone and usually requires professional installation.

As an alternative, get a smaller tree that has most of its roots in place. While it starts small, the tree will grow much faster and be much stronger once established. This is because the tree was able to develop a healthy root system in your soil without struggling as much to support its large top growth.

On the plus-side, it's cheaper to get a small tree! The smaller you go, the better your odds of getting a good root establishment. If you go with 1 year saplings, it may be beneficial to get two trees and plan to remove the weaker of the two once they're both established. That way, if one dies you still have a tree.

Lack of organic material

Unless you've been heavily feeding your yard with compost and leaf mulch for many years, your yard most likely doesn't have enough organic matter.

So you can give your trees a boost by putting a nice layer of compost within the root zone. Again, this is the whole area under the tree canopy. This is a long-term thing that may not be immediately noticeable. Instead, you are slowly adding organic matter back into your topsoil that will lead to good health for your tree in the long run.

If you don't have your own compost or good local access, try leaf litter mulch which is packed with organic matter and trace minerals. You can also find partially composted wood mulch - as long as it isn't treated with any dyes or preservation agents.

Many municipalities do a yard waste collection. Check local areas to see if they offer cheap or free mulch/compost.

Weed trimmer damage

It's all too common. I've done it. I'm trimming along, making my yard all neat and pretty (sometimes), and tell myself I'll keep the trimmer controlled. Then, inevitably.

Bzzzzzzz...ppp. Oops. Sorry tree!

So here it is: Don't use a weed trimmer by your tree! Don't bump them with your mower!

Damaging the bark is like breaking the blood vessels of your tree. Most of the life and health of your tree is just below the bark. Young trees, especially, have very thin bark until they mature. So every time you nick, rip, or buzz your tree's bark you open it up to disease problems and reduce its circulation.

Too much grass

Having a tree in a well-designed planting bed is actually very helpful. When a tree is just located within a lawn, no border or bed, it has to compete directly with the grass.

Grass and trees generally prefer different soil biology and chemistry, and actually secrete chemicals that *compete* with each other.

So give your tree a planting area that allows space for root development. While you're at it, make sure your planting area has a good covering of topsoil or compost, is well mulched, and allows for good water absorption. Don't put your tree on top of a mound. Instead, plant it at level in a bed that allows water to be caught in the planting bed rather than run off. This also helps the roots to grow outward for better development.

There you go! I hope you found this helpful. Be sure to visit Aesthetic Ecosystems for your low maintenance landscape needs!

Cheers,

Ben Hale

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