



The Quick Guide to Tree Planting Like a Pro

You can greatly increase your odds of successful tree planting by following a few basic steps!

I am going to assume you have already read [What you NEED to Know Before Planting that Tree](#). If not, go check it out to make sure you're planting the right tree in the right space!

As my most annoying TV character Barney the Dinosaur would say, "It's Super-DEE-Duper important!"

OK, Let's Plant a Tree!

It is much easier to have a helper to hold the tree stable while planting. Kids love being important helpers, by the way. I only know this because I'm basically a kid at heart... and my kids love to help too.

Evening is generally best for planting, so the tree doesn't sit in the sun all day thinking it needs to get its photosynthesis on. It's what the cool trees do.



Planting is always better with help!

- **Dig the hole**

- Now that you have figured out the right spot, you of course dig the hole. A good tip is to keep the sod intact, and place the soil on a tarp or piece of scrap cardboard. It is best to keep the layers separate – keep the topsoil separate from the lower base soil. That way you can return them in approximately the same order for optimal establishment.
- Make the hole about 1.5 to 2x wider than the existing root ball of your tree. This will allow you to spread roots out in its new home.
- Dig the hole a few inches lower than the root crown. This is the point where the trunk bulges and then transitions to roots.
- Once the hole is dug, use your shovel to loosen the sides and bottom of the hole to allow for better water and root penetration. (primarily in clay soils)

- **Remove the tree** from its container or burlap. Check for bound roots that wrap around the outside of the root mass. These must be cut to prevent the tree from strangling itself.
- **Place the tree in the hole.** Ensure the **crown sits right above the soil level.** The tree will not be healthy if the crown is too low or too high. Add or remove soil at the bottom of the hole if needed.
- **Spread the roots** outward from the base of the tree.
- **Slowly begin filling** in the hole. Make sure the roots remain positioned.
- **Settle the roots.** Once the hole is about half filled, ensure the tree is standing straight, and then shake the trunk up and down with very small movements to move the roots just slightly. This will help spaces begin to fill in and ensure the roots become settled into place. After the slight shaking, lightly pack down the soil to ensure good root-soil contact.
- **Continue filling** in the hole, replacing the topsoil at the top of the hole. Use any remaining soil to build a raised berm around the edge of the hole, or at least on the downhill side. This will help keep water localized during irrigation.
- **Lightly Compact.** Once the hole is filled, pack down the top with your foot to compact the soil slightly. While I don't like soil compaction, it is important that the roots make good contact with soil or the tree becomes unable to respire.
- **Water your tree** immediately with a healthy amount of water.
 - I recommend watering well every day for at least a week, depending on the humidity and soil moisture.
 - After the first week, begin spreading out waterings to reduce dependency on irrigation.
- **Stabilize.** It is often best to stake your tree by placing stakes outside the root zone and tying the trunk off in three directions. Make sure there is a chafe-guard of some sort where the line contacts the trunk. This can be as simple as a piece of garden hose.
- your tree!

What now? After you plant

The initial maintenance needed for your tree is to water appropriately. Many actually overwater their trees. Make sure the soil is not already water logged before you water again. The tree does need time to 'breathe.' Most trees do not like their roots constantly submerged, and the soil could turn anaerobic if left water-logged.

Periodically check the retaining lines to ensure they are not too tight or loose. These can usually be removed after a good chunk of growing season.

While the tree is young, you may want to place a shield around the trunk if you live in an area with deer.

Enjoy watching your tree grow! Keep an eye out for the emergence of problems.

Match.com for your tree

Most trees you see are planted in isolation. Some do okay, some do not. Why is that? Tell me how many trees you see that grow by themselves in a forest.

Point is, trees do much better when they have companions to help them along.

To keep this simple, I'll limit this to one suggestion. If we all do this suggestion, then maybe we can talk about others.



A young tree with its community of supporters

Plant your tree with a nitrogen fixing companion.

Okay, if you're planting a honey locust, black locust, alder, mesquite, or mimosa you can disregard this suggestion. Why? Because those trees fix their own nitrogen! Most other trees do not, but could highly benefit from the company.

Here's how it works. You plant another nitrogen fixer right next to your primary tree. This support or 'nurse' plant can be a tree or shrub. You let it grow a bit, then prune it back. Then you repeat again and again. After a few years once your main tree is established, you can remove your nurse plant.

So how do I get one of these nurses? Well here's a short list.¹ And some are native, some aren't. Make your own decision on what is right.

- Honey Locust
- Alder
- Alfalfa
- Autumn Olive (considered invasive)
- Black Locust
- Blue False Indigo

- Goumi
- Kentucky Coffee Tree
- Mesquite
- Mimosa
- Wisteria

Failure to thrive

Sometimes trees just don't take off. It's the reality. We as humans are trying to do something nature is very successful at doing on its own. The interaction between nutrients, microbes, soil, water, and tree is incredibly complex. And it is surprising to me that we can actually throw a tree into a hole and it most often actually grows.

With all that being said, I have my own thoughts on why trees don't thrive. I have to admit these are my opinions based on my research and experience, but may not necessarily be right.

Most likely one of the previous tips was not followed. Most often, I think it is the soil. In most developed areas we have greatly destroyed our once healthy soils, and a large percentage of trees we plant are mature forest species that evolved in ancient healthy soils.

Another common issue is due to chemical application. Lawn chemicals can kill a tree. They're broadleaf herbicides, which kills everything that doesn't look like grass. Once a tree drinks this up, you're having some serious problems. Salt can do the same thing. If you're salting your walks and driveways a ton in the winter, this can kill your soils. And your plants will die along with it.

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

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Cheers,
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