

Caring for your new tree or shrub

Congratulations! You have thoughtfully planted a new tree or shrub. While trees and shrubs can be easy to care for, they still require some attention to ensure they thrive. Follow these instructions and observe your plant closely. If you notice any serious or ongoing problems, consult the resources listed at the end of this document, a certified arborist or a reliable nursery.

Watering

A new tree or shrub must be watered immediately after planting to reduce air pockets and settle the soil. Follow Credit Valley Conservation's *How to Plant a Potted Tree or Shrub* fact sheet for planting instructions.

Until your plant has developed sufficient roots after planting, it's up to you to ensure it gets the water it needs. The soil around your new tree or shrub should always feel cool and slightly moist, but not wet. Both over and under watering can be fatal to a new planting.

The most effective watering method is to lay a drip or soaker hose on the ground circling the plant. If you don't have a drip or a soaker hose, remove the nozzle from your garden hose and place it 30 to 60 cm (1 to 2 ft) from the base of the plant on a very slow trickle, moving the hose periodically for even coverage. Both methods ensure the water penetrates deep into the soil, reaching all the plant's roots. Never use a sprinkler as most of the water will evaporate before soaking into the soil. It can also wet the leaves making them more prone to disease.



It is always best to water early in the morning. For the first two years, water for 15 to 20 minutes twice a week during the growing season if there has been no rain. In the third year, change the watering frequency to one hour once a week if there has been no rain to give your plant periodic, deep soakings. After the third year, you should not need to water except during periods of extreme drought.

Watering schedules will need to be adjusted for rain or drying conditions such as excessive wind or prolonged periods of heat or drought. If your soil does not drain well and water tends to puddle around the plant, you may need to reduce the duration and/or frequency of watering. Alternatively, plants in lighter, sandy soils may require more frequent watering. The amount of water also varies with the size of the plant. Smaller plants require less water than large ones.

Symptoms of overwatering such as yellow, drooping leaves or leaf loss can look a lot like signs of under watering or other problems such as damage from road salt, pests or disease. If you think you may be overwatering, feel your soil 5 to 8 cm (2 to 3 in) below the surface to see if it is wet. Do not water until it feels dry or just slightly damp.



**Credit Valley
Conservation**
inspired by nature



Shredded bark mulch

Leaf mulch

Mulching

Mulch is any organic material, such as shredded bark, woodchips or leaves, that is placed on top of the soil around the base of your plant to keep it cool and moist, while also preventing grass and weeds from growing. This layer of material also insulates plant roots throughout the winter and adds to the organic matter in your soil as it breaks down. Natural mulches are best. If using fallen leaves, try chopping them up first by running over them with the lawn mower to create smaller pieces that look more attractive and break down more easily.

Do not use leaves, bark, or wood chips from black walnut or butternut trees. Even after a period of composting, this material releases juglone – a substance that inhibits the growth of many other plants.

Apply a layer of mulch 5 to 8 cm (2 to 3 in) thick around your tree or shrub, covering the ground above the root ball and wider if possible. Keep mulch in a doughnut shape, making sure that the mulch is 5 to 8 cm (2 to 3 in) away from the plant's stem or trunk to prevent rotting, disease and fungus. Mulch can be replaced as needed as it breaks down.



Pull mulch back from the base of the plant. Think doughnut, not volcano. Do not pile mulch up around the plant. To avoid disease, no soil or mulch should touch the trunk or stem.

Feeding

Use only natural sources of fertilizer such as compost or manure, and apply using the top-dressing method. Simply spread the fertilizer over the soil around the tree or shrub and the nutrients will gradually make their way down into the soil. This method avoids any soil disturbance that could damage the plant's roots. As with mulch, be sure to keep fertilizers away from the trunk of the tree or shrub by at least 5 to 8 cm (2 to 3 in). Natural fertilizers can be applied any time of the year.

Staking Your Tree

In most cases, staking newly planted trees is not necessary unless they are at risk of being shifted by winds or if the roots will not support the tree's height. The stakes (one or two) should be driven into the ground at a 90-degree angle to the ground (parallel to the tree) about 60 cm (2 ft) out from the tree. Once securely in the ground, the stake(s) should be approximately half the height of the tree. Tie the stakes to the lower half of the tree using a soft, flexible material (old nylons or t-shirt material work well) that will not cut into the bark and will allow trunk movement. Remove stakes and ties after one year. Keeping them longer will damage the trunk.

Pruning

The best time to prune most trees and shrubs is from late fall until early spring before buds or leaves appear. This reduces stress and the chance of disease. No leaves makes pruning decisions easier. The exception is shrubs that bloom early in the spring. These should be pruned immediately after they finish blooming.

During the first three years after planting, only dead, diseased or damaged branches should be removed. Use clean, sharp pruning shears or pruners to clip small twigs or branches. Do not use wound paint after cutting as this interferes with the plant's natural wound-repair process.

To shape or trim a shrub, first determine which branches need to be cut and ensure that you are not removing more than one quarter of the shrub's leafy branches in any one year. Remove dead, damaged or dying branches first. Next, remove any branches that are crossed or rubbing against another. Finally, if necessary, select any remaining branches in order to shape the plant evenly.



Cut 0.5 cm (0.25 in) away from the bud.



Cut on a 45-degree angle down and away from the bud.

Always trim branches back to a bud or to a “parent” branch (the branch that it grows out of). If you are cutting back to a bud, select a bud that faces the outside of the plant near where you want to cut. This bud will remain on the branch. Cut through the branch that you are removing about 0.5 cm (0.25 in) away from the bud or parent branch. Cut at a 45-degree angle down and away from the bud. Avoid cutting too close or too steep as this could damage the plant.

With trees, it is even more important that pruning be made in the right locations, at the right time, using the right tools. Contact a certified tree care specialist if you think your tree needs pruning. The Ontario Chapter of the International Society of Arboriculture has a list of qualified arborists: www.isaontario.com.

Other Damage

There are several common causes of weakened or damaged trees and shrubs. Avoid these and you're on your way to a healthy, happy plant.

Adapted from LEAF's *Tree Care Guide: Six Things to Avoid*.

Lawn Mower Damage: Bumping, grazing and “nicks” in the trunk caused by lawn mowers and weed-wackers can kill a young tree or shrub. A wide circle of mulch around your new plant will prevent grass from growing and eliminate the need for mowing there.

Attaching Things to Trees: Attaching bird houses or other objects to trees, either by rope, wire, string or nails, can restrict new tree growth and create wounds where pests and disease can enter. If you want to attach something small such as a bird house to a tree, hang it using loose-fitting soft material. Check occasionally for any signs of rubbing, moisture build-up, or other damage and reposition or retie if necessary. Use this same technique for other objects.



Don't attach sharp, abrasive or heavy objects to trees.



Don't strangle your tree.

Photo credit: Nora Bryan



Attach objects using loose-fitting, soft materials.

Root Damage: Keep in mind that roots extend outwards up to three times the height of the plant. Digging up, installing paving or interlocking bricks, or even adding a few inches of soil over this area can damage roots or prevent them from getting the water and oxygen they need.

De-icing Salt: Avoid planting salt-sensitive plants in areas where salt is spread or where road salt is sprayed by passing vehicles. Where appropriate, look for a more environmentally-friendly salt alternative to use on your sidewalk and driveway.

Lawn Fertilizers: Using a chemical lawn fertilizer that is high in nitrogen may also affect your plants. Instead of applying chemical fertilizer, lightly rake compost over your lawn and around your trees and shrubs for a more balanced, natural fertilizer. Compost will also improve your soil's texture, while chemical fertilizers will not.

Pesticides and Herbicides: Using cosmetic pesticides is now banned in Ontario. By following the above guidelines, your new tree or shrub will be healthy, strong and better able to resist pest damage. Remember, most insects are beneficial. They keep harmful pests in check and help to pollinate your garden.

For natural sources of pest control visit:

www.canningperennials.com/acatalog/Organic-Pest-Control.html

There are many beneficial insects, including pollinators such as the native bumble bee below. Insects help pollinate nearly 70 per cent of all flowering plants, including trees. Protect them by eliminating pesticide use and welcoming them to your yard. Bumble bees are usually reluctant to sting unless they are disturbed.

For more information on pollinators visit:

<https://seeds.ca/pollination>



Photo credit: Aarathi Edward

References

Credit Valley Conservation. How to Plant a Potted Tree or Shrub.

www.cvc.ca/howtoplant

Harris, Marjorie. (2009) Ecological Gardening. Toronto, ON: Random House Canada.

LEAF. Leaf Resources webpages. www.yourleaf.org/tree-care

Toronto Master Gardeners. Planting a Tree.

www.torontomastergardeners.ca

Trees are Good. Tree Owner Information webpages.

www.treesaregood.org/treeowner

Tree Canada. Tree Planting Guide.

www.treecanada.ca/resources

Urban, James. (2008) Up by Roots – Healthy Soils and Trees in the Built Environment. Champaign, IL: International Society of Arboriculture.

Xerces Society. Bees. www.xerces.org

Additional Resources

Sustainable Landscaping Resources:

www.cvc.ca/landscaping

Your Green Yard offers workshops and presentations on native plant gardening and landscaping to local residents within the Credit River Watershed.

www.cvc.ca/ygy

Greening Corporate Grounds offers advice, landscape concept plans and planting events to businesses and institutions within the Credit River Watershed.

www.cvc.ca/gcg

Countryside Stewardship offers workshops as well as technical and financial assistance to support rural environmental stewardship.

www.cvc.ca/countrysidestewardship