Fall for Planting

Cool weather brings a great opportunity to make additions to your landscape. Woody ornamentals, or trees and shrubs with woody stems, are best planted in the late fall and early spring. Planting in the fall gives time for the tree or shrub to establish large vigorous root systems throughout the winter before warm weather and drought conditions become problems in the late spring and summer. Plant selection and placement, installation, and care are the key points to consider when adding any tree or shrub.

Selecting the right plant for the right place is essential to the survival of any landscape. It is not important whether you have the perfect plant and need to decide on a place, or you have an empty spot just begging for a plant. What is important, is matching the plant and place together. Make sure that you consider the mature size of the plant, light requirement, growth habit, moisture recommendation, bloom time, and if applicable, bloom color. As I drive through Lumberton, I always cringe a little when I see a large shade tree planted under a power line. Unless you plan to take up pruning as your weekly exercise, I would recommend thinking through the placement of each plant before installation.

It is not just digging a hole and plopping the plant into it. Properly installing a plant in your landscape is a vital step towards its health and longevity. The hole should be approximately 3 times the diameter of the root ball or pot that the plant came in. When placed into the hole, the plant should sit flush, or just above, the level of the soil. Fill in around the plant with the soil that was originally removed from the hole. While it is tempting to add soil conditioners, organic matter, and/or sand to the backfill, resist the temptation as this can cause a “bathtub” effect by interrupting drainage patterns. Roots need oxygen too. So instead of compacting the soil tightly around the plant, utilize tree stakes or guy wires to ensure stability.

Once the plant has been selected and installed into the landscape, only half the battle is over. Continued care is essential. The single most important need of a new plant in the landscape is water. Until the root system is established, a one to three gallon size plant requires approximately three to five gallons of water twice a week. If the weather is hot and sunny, this requirement increases to four or five times a week. Without ample water, a plant will immediately show signs of stress and may die before it ever has a chance to become established.
Two weeks ago, the Extension Master Gardener Volunteers installed new landscaping at the Robeson County Fairgrounds. Since the original installation, the plants have been watered virtually every day. Saturday during the fair, I was unable to water the plants due to the sheer madness of the crowds. By Sunday afternoon, the plants were wilted significantly. As I set up hoses and sprinklers to perk up the droopy plants, many people expressed their surprise at how quickly the plants wilted. You must remember that it takes time for the root system to become established, and until that time, it is just like caring for a potted plant.

Planting can be done at any time throughout the year, but installing woody trees and shrubs in the fall is a great way to give plants a head start. Proper plant selection and placement, installation, and care are the keys to healthy, long lived woody ornamentals. So hurry up, get out there, and add some pizzazz to your landscape.

If you have any questions or comments, please feel free to contact me, Kerrie Roach, horticultural Extension agent, at North Carolina Cooperative Extension, Robeson County Center, at (910) 671-3276 or by E-mail at Kerrie_Roach@ncsu.edu or visit North Carolina Cooperative Extension, Robeson County Center’s website at Robeson.ces.ncsu.edu.