

Tree Care Basics

Tree Maintenance Schedule



With proper care and maintenance, trees can survive, thrive, and be a valuable commodity in our communities. Understanding how trees function and the maintenance needs is important in keeping trees healthy and vigorous. Maintenance starts the day the tree is planted and continues throughout its lifetime.

Water

Water is vital to a tree's survival during the first three years after planting. If the soil is dry, the tree will need about two gallons of water per diameter inch of the trunk. To reduce runoff, provide at a rate of about a gallon per minute—water the root ball and just beyond. The frequency will depend on water uptake, surface evaporation, and soil drainage. Check for dryness in fast-draining soils every other day and weekly in slow-draining soils. Pay attention to watering needs throughout the tree's life. Check established trees weekly for dryness—water within six feet of the trunk and at the dripline. Start checking soil moisture in spring and continue until the soil freezes.

Mulch

A mulch layer will help conserve soil moisture around the tree roots, help suppress weeds, and protect the trunk from string trimmers and mowers. Maintain a mulch ring around the tree between 3 to 4 feet in diameter, the wider, the better. There should be at most 4 inches of mulch over the roots. Too much can prevent oxygen from reaching the roots. Organic materials like wood chips and leaves are best. Wood chips will break down more slowly, requiring less frequent replacement. Do not place mulch against the tree trunk; leave about a fist width of space between the trunk and the start of the mulch ring.

Weeds

Weeds should be routinely removed from the mulched area around the tree. Excessive weeds compete with the tree for available water and nutrients. Remove weeds by hand. Herbicides are not recommended for weed control, especially around newly established trees.

Inspection

Inspect trees regularly for insects, disease, and physical and environmental damage. Inspect the size, color, and distribution of leaves. Look at individual leaves and the whole crown, including the branch and section back. Examine the crown, branches, trunk, and area around the roots. Inspect for damaged, dead, or hanging branches, cracks, fungi, and cavities.

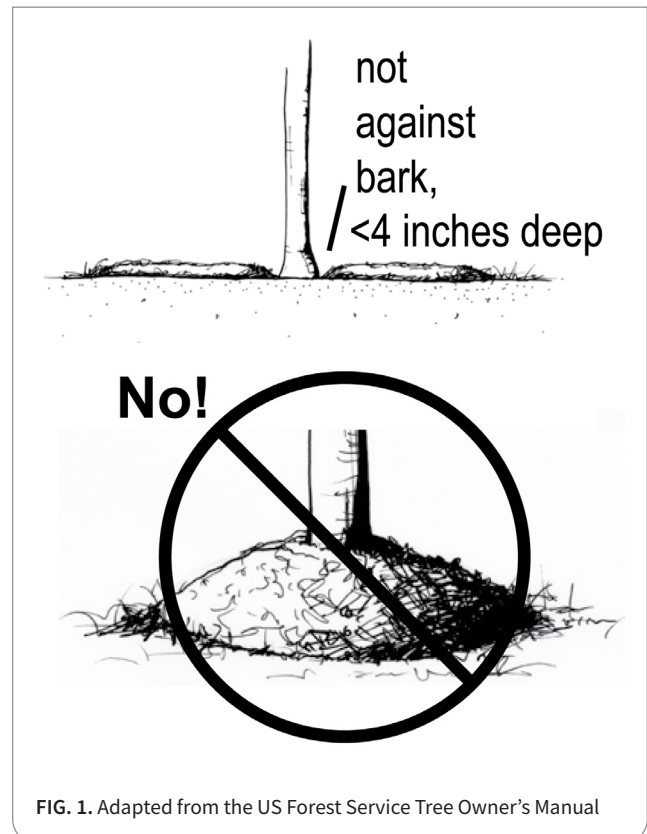


FIG. 1. Adapted from the US Forest Service Tree Owner's Manual

Pruning

Prune trees to maintain health and increase aesthetics and safety. Proper pruning can minimize damage and encourage growth. It is best to prune trees in the winter to prevent disease and insect infestation. Pruning dead branches and limbs can be done at anytime. Always cut back to the main trunk, the base of a branch, or above a bud.

Explore more about tree pruning with Purdue Extension by scanning the QR code or visiting [youtube.com/watch?v=ZiWrTtL5Q88](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZiWrTtL5Q88)



Fertilizing

Apply fertilizer only if a soil test indicates a nutrient deficiency. Be sure to use appropriate amounts; overdosing with fertilizer can harm the tree and leach into groundwater and other bodies of water. Applying weed and feed to a lawn may injure or kill trees. Some of the herbicides in these products can be absorbed through the tree's leaves or be taken up by the roots. Do not use any chemical that will kill broad-leaved weeds. Preemergent herbicides are safe near most trees if indicated on the label. Be sure to check all labels before use.

Seasonal Maintenance Schedule

* as needed + increased maintenance / normal maintenance - none

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec
Water	-	*	*	*	*	+	+	+	+	*	/	/
Mulch	-	-	*	*	*	*	-	-	-	-	-	-
Weed Control	-	-	-	/	+	+	+	+	+	-	-	-
Inspect	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/
Prune	+	+	/	-	-	/	-	-	-	-	-	+
Plant	-	-	+	/	-	-	-	-	-	+	+	-
Fertilize	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	*	-	-

Lifetime Schedule

Care	At planting	Years 1-3	Years 4-10	After 10 years
Water	5+ gallons	Critical - when soil is dry, provide 2 gallons per diameter inch of trunk	As needed	As needed
Mulch	2-4 inches deep - do not touch trunk	Check and adjust level in spring		
Stake	Only if needed	Check spring and fall. Remove after 1-2 years.	N/A	N/A
Clean root collar	Uncover at planting	Clean root collar every year		
Check for girdling roots	Check before planting	N/A	Check every 4-5 years	
Inspect	Choose a healthy tree	Inspect leaves, branches, crown, and trunk every year.		
Check Safety	Select proper location	Inspect in summer, winter, and after storms.		
Prune	Eliminate extra leaders	Prune lightly in year 2-3	Every 3 years	Every 5 years, conifers as need

Adapted from the US Forest Service Tree Owner's Manual

Planting

Before the Plant

Before planting, consider the type of tree, the location, and the care that can be provided. Select a location that will not interfere with utility lines, pavement, or buildings. Be sure to locate all underground utilities before digging. Call the national call-before-you-dig phone number at 811. It's a good idea to check the local laws governing tree planting to ensure compliance with regulations and ordinances in every town or municipality.

When to Plant

Ideally, plant trees during the dormant season, which is in early spring before bud break or in the fall after leaf drop. The weather is cool during this time, allowing plants to establish roots before hot summers or freezing soil.

Planting Stress

Transplant shock will cause slowed growth and reduced vitality following transplanting. Balled-and-burlapped trees lose a considerable amount of their root system when dug at the nursery which can lead to transplant shock.

Containerized trees that have circling, also known as girdling, or kinked roots that must be cut, may experience transplant shock. Preparing the planting site, careful handling, and good follow-up care can reduce transplant shock and encourage recovery.

For more information on how to properly plant a tree, visit go.illinois.edu/planttrees.

For video instruction, tune in to Purdue Extension by scanning the QR code or visiting youtube.com/watch?v=k5rUgd7BmiA



Additional Resources

For additional resources, including mulching techniques, planting guides, and more, visit extension.illinois.edu/plants/infosheets

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