

Proper Plant Practices

Just how important is proper planting? Can it make a difference in the health of the plants future? Do you really need to use the right soil mixture, be sure to plant the plant deep enough ...but not too deep, water in the plant well, be sure to fertilize.

The short answer is yes to all. My goal is to explain what proper planting is and why each step is important. Let's start with the visit to the nursery.

Not all nurseries are the same. They may all carry the same plants but the health of those plants can vary significantly. What I look for in selecting a plant is not how tall, or how many flowers or flower buds it has. I look for how nicely shaped the plant is, what I call branch symmetry. Then I look at the overall health of the leaves. Don't buy a plant because it is the biggest or has the most blossoms unless you are looking for instant gratification. Size and blossom will come as the plant matures in your garden; in this case patience is a virtue.

You have selected the plant and you need to get it home. How important is this step? Very. Based on many years in the retail nursery trade I believe 80% of the customers that visit a nursery never think about how they will get their new purchase home until after the purchase. Your worst enemies are broken branches and foliage damage from wind. Take the time to protect your new investment. I can't stress this enough. Our nursery staff will not allow a plant to leave the nursery without being properly protected. This can take a lot of time depending on what you have purchased and it's just as important as choosing the plant.

Now the plant is home and we are ready to plant. You will need some planting soil, a little fertilizer and a lot of water. These items can have a big impact on how well the plant grows once in the ground. Your plant has a root system. This root system is the mouth of the plant; it is how the plant eats. The roots take up (eat) soil nutrients that will combine with sunlight in the leaves to metabolize into energy that helps the plant grow. These soil nutrients need to be broken down so the roots can absorb them. This is done with the help of the soil's best friends, the microbes: mother earth's unseen workers. A healthy soil is teeming with these microscopic friends. The microbes live and grow in organic matter. Organic matter can mean many things and is a subject all by itself. For this application I mean fully composted organic matter, either from your compost bin or from the nursery. It can be purchased in bags or bulk. What is most important is that the planting soil is completely composted and not still in the breaking down process, which gives off a lot of heat and can burn the tender new roots of the plant. Placing the organic soil around the root system of the plant allows the roots to retrieve the soil nutrients with the help of the microbes. Another great advantage to using a composted planting mix is its ability to hold moisture. Until the root system has a chance to expand into the existing soil all its nutrients and moisture come from the zone right around the root ball.

What should you use for a fertilizer? There are many different fertilizers on the market. I prefer an organic fertilizer because it is most friendly to the soil microbes. Many inorganic fertilizers have a chemical make up that can be harmful to the microbes. I also try to stay away from high nitrogen fertilizers. Some nitrogen is needed for healthy soils and plants but in small amounts. Our nursery uses an organic fertilizer that includes the N-P-K that most fertilizers have but it also has calcium and sulfur in the blend. Another advantage in using organic fertilizers is it feeds the plant slowly and helps keep the soil healthy. The amount to use will vary with the size of the plant and the type you use. Consult your nursery staff at the time of purchase. I like to work the fertilizer into the planting mixture; this helps to get it evenly distributed around the root ball. One last comment on fertilizers. Soil makeup & fertility is a very complicated & integrated system with many variables. Most plants can handle a range of variation. Be sure to ask the nursery staff for their recommendations based on the plant or plants purchased. Proper planting soil and fertilizer is very important.

How deep and how wide to dig the planting hole? I recommend a hole twice the width and a little deeper than the root ball. Most roots grow laterally so it is more important to give the root ball a lot of room from side to side. Some of the existing soil can be saved to mix with your planting soil, usually about half, the balance can be hauled away. Add a little bit of the soil mixture to the bottom of the hole and you are ready to set the plant. A common mistake is planting too deep. This is more damaging than planting too high but it is best to get it just right. The best way to check the depth is to lay a stick across the hole and bring the top of the plant ball about even with the bottom of the stick. I like to mix about half of the existing soil with the soil amendment/fertilizer you have prepared. A common practice after filling the planting hole with the soil mixture is to pack or tamp with your foot...don't do that! Water in the plant next. In leaving the soil unpacked around the root ball the water will soak into that loose soil and settle around the root ball. The water will turn the planting mixture into slurry, this is a good thing - I call it mudding it in. Don't let the water overflow the hole, it just makes more of a mess. After mudding in let it stand for a while. When some of the water has percolated through the soil your mixture will have settled. Add whatever soil mixture is needed to bring the level around the plant up to the proper grade and give the plant some more water. While it is settling you can start cleaning up. If this new plant is going into the lawn you need to take out some additional sod from around the plant and put down a two-inch layer of mulch. The circle should be no less than 3' in diameter and should be used regardless of what size plant you have installed. The most common injury to plants is your lawn mower. The mulch should not be wood chips, it should be bark mulch. The circle will keep the mower away from the base of the plant and the mulch will help to conserve moisture in the root zone.

Staking a tree should be considered if it is a very exposed location. My preference is using steel fence post, driving in three stakes within the circle of sod that you have removed. Use a tree strapping, not rope or twine. Do not use a slipknot around the trunk or you will have problems when the trunk tries to grow. We usually leave the tree strapped for one year. Be careful of buried lines.

You can now walk away from your new plant knowing you have given it the start it needs to grow and be happy. This doesn't mean your care for the plant is over, but the hard part is.