The Steps in Planting a Container Tree

Rafael Porto, of suburban west side Indianapolis, planted the first tree in Hoosier Heartlands "Plant a Million" project as part of his 4-H Forestry project. The tree is a Bur Oak (Quercus macrocarpa), which was recognized as the 2001 Urban Tree of the Year. Rafael planted his tree near the front of Chapel Glen Elementary School in Wayne Township. Mike Warner, chairperson of the Hoosier Heartland Forestry Committee, donated the tree. Rafael prepared a poster showing how to properly plant a container grown tree, which was Champion exhibit at the Marion County Fair and was a blue ribbon winner at the Indiana State Fair. This series of pictures tells the story of how to plant a container grown tree. Click on a picture to the left to make it larger.

Grass and weeds rob young trees of needed moisture. So the first step in planting is to clear away all growth in area two to three feet away form where the tree trunk will be. It is easy to check the cleared area by simply setting the container and tree in the middle. Take time to properly prepare the hole. An old time true saying is that it is better to plant a $20 tree in a $50 hole that to plant a $50 tree in a $20 hole.

Dig the hole at least two times the diameter of the container. Three times is better. If the hole is being dug in a clay soil, roughen the sides by picking chunks out of the slicked sides of the hole with a screwdriver, knife or other tool. If you are planting the tree in the yard of a newly constructed home where trucks and other equipment have compacted the soil, spade or till an area 6 or 8 feet in diameter to allow the young roots to penetrate the soil. Remember the $50 hole story. Determine the hole depth by placing the container and tree in the hole. The trunk flare (swollen or thickened part of the trunk just above the roots) should be at ground level.

Remove the container and check for roots that may be circling around the root mass. If any are found, loosen them with your fingers or a dull instrument. If the circling is severe, prune the problem roots away. Circling roots can "girdle" the root mass and strangle the tree. Place the tree in the hole and fill the hole about halfway with original soil. Soil amendments such as peat moss are not a good idea because the roots will remain in that area and not move laterally into the original soil. Unless the soil is very poor, do not add fertilizer. Pour three to five gallons of water in the hole and allow time for it to soak into the surrounding soil. This helps to form a bond between the original soil and the backfilled soil as well as providing the tree roots a good soaking. It may take several minutes for the water to soak in but it is important to take the time and do the job right.

Finish replacing the original soil around the root mass. As you fill the hole, it is important to firm the soil to remove any air pockets. But do not tamp the soil with your feet or other method. This can compact the soil and make the necessary air and water circulation a

problem. As you can see in the photo, leave a slight depression for rainwater to collect. You can also completely fill the hole (not above the trunk flare) and build a three to four inch ridge around the outside of the hole area for a water holding basin.

It is a good idea to protect the young tree with a vinyl or other wrap. The wrap should be removed in the spring but likely can be used again in the fall. This wrap reduces rodent, sunscald and winter freeze damage and the white color even alerts lawn mower operators to stay their distance. Finally, place a 2-inch deep layer of organic mulch over the entire cleared area. Mulching is one of the most important things you can do for a tree. It helps to imitate the natural forest conditions where trees grow best. Do not pile the mulch up around the tree and create a "mulch volcano". This only provides a place for diseases and rodents to damage the tree.

This young Bur Oak is ready to grow to be a stately tree standing guard over the entrance to the school. Bur Oaks will grow to more than 100 feet tall and up to four feet in diameter. The cup covering its large acorns has a fringe around its edges and is the origin of the tree's name. It grows throughout Indiana and is an excellent yard and park shade tree. It is also a valuable timber tree and is a member of the White Oak family of trees.