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Give Trees a Chance

Dennis Hinkamp
Utah State University

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GARDEN NOTES

GIVE TREES A CHANCE

By Dennis Hinkamp

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Like any other adoption process, bringing a tree home requires a careful and considerate transition period. Once a tree is purchased and brought home, the first and most important step is to plant it correctly. Too many die or suffer greatly before ever getting a chance to enjoy living in Utah.

“Sometimes a tree lives many years, then later shows the symptoms of incorrect planting, and eventually dies,” says Jerry Goodspeed, Utah State University Extension horticulturist. “When digging the hole for a tree, don’t be cheap and wimpy. Dig a nice big hole, at least three times as wide, but only as deep as the root ball.”

The wide hole loosens the soil and gives ample room for extended root growth, Goodspeed explains. If the hole is too deep, when the tree settles, the soil will damage the lower trunk. The soil level on the trunk needs to remain the same as that around the root ball or the pot the tree came in. After making sure the hole is the right depth and width, gently set the tree in the hole. If it is in a plastic pot, cut or carefully pull the pot off.

“This sounds like common sense, but I have seen plants left in their plastic or pulp containers, then five years later they finally get too large for the small roots and die,” Goodspeed says.

He says if the tree is balled and wrapped in burlap, remove all the burlap, string, twine and wire basket. In order to disturb the roots as little as possible, do this while the tree is already in the hole. However, some twine or wire can be cut before the tree is lowered into the hole to make the process easier.

Though some people think that burlap doesn’t need to be removed, Goodspeed says research compiled at USU found that burlap can remain in the soil for up to 15 years. When not removed, burlap or twine can girdle and kill trees.

“It’s discouraging to grow a tree for five to 10 years only to have it decline and die, because it was strangled by twine that was not removed,” he says. “My office could be filled with samples of trees that have suffered this unnecessary death.”

He says after the tree is in the hole and all the packing material is removed, fill most of the hole with the dirt you just removed. The tree eventually needs to grow into the native soil, so it gets a better start if surrounded by it from the beginning. If the urge to add organic

matter is ingrained in your mind, mix 25 percent organic matter into the soil before backfilling.

“Never fertilize the tree the first year,” Goodspeed warns. “Fill the hole with water as you back fill, then water deeply every week or so until the tree is established.”

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