

Fall Transplanting

Paul Hetzler

Each November, star-gazers like to watch the Leonid meteor shower, which seems rather voyeuristic to me, but whatever. November is popular with hunters as well, and Americans observe Thanksgiving in that month. It also happens to be a great time to transplant deciduous trees.

Trees from the nursery which have their own own root systems (either ball-and-burlap or container-grown) may be planted just about any time the soil is not frozen. But digging up and moving a tree in the growing season is kind of like having surgery without anesthesia. It can be done, but the outcome isn't always so good.

Once the leaves are off, though, trees can be more successfully moved because they're dormant, a term which we anglophones all know is French for "sleeping so deeply that you don't awaken even if someone digs you up by the roots." But maybe I should check on that. Anyway, studies show that small trees recover from transplanting better than large trees, and will very often end up out-performing them. Plus, moving a small tree is easier on your back.

When you go to dig a tree from the woods or the edge of a field, remember that you should have permission from the owner. Also that it's more important to dig wide than deep. Even with oaks and walnuts that have big taproots, getting good lateral roots is more important than getting the whole taproot. To reflect this fact, the ideal planting hole should be saucer-shaped and at least twice as wide as the root ball, but no deeper.

Adding gobs of organic matter to the backfill likely dates back to ancient times, when people would sometimes grab an arborist, if one was handy, and throw them in the planting hole. Possibly in response to this, most arborists today recommend little or no additional organic matter in native soils with reasonably good fertility. The vegetation growing at the planting site will give some indication of how good the soil is.

However, in cases where soils are exceptionally poor – compacted clay, pure sand, or in urban sites, rubble – more organic matter is indicated. In such cases, dig a planting hole twice as wide as usual. You can replace up to one-third by volume (of the excavated soil) with organic matter, thoroughly mixing your amendments with the soil from the pit beside the hole before backfilling. No matter how good or poor the soil is, no commercial fertilizer should be used at planting time.

Roots will continue to grow as long as the soil remains unfrozen, so it's important to keep tabs on soil moisture. In general, staking should be reserved for vampires. And for transplanted trees whose root systems are small compared to their tops, as well as at windy sites. Trunk movement is critical for the development of strong trunks with good taper, so if staking is needed, use strips of cloth or bicycle inner tube around the trunk. Remove stakes within one year, though. A 5-8 cm mulch layer over the planting hole completes the job. Be sure to pull mulch away from the trunk. When mulch is banked against the tree, this invites insect pests, pathogens, and rodents.

Happy Autumn, and please—no arborists in the backfill.

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