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HOME-GARDEN

Small investment in time and effort pays long dividends in tree planting

By Steven Conaway Special to the Telegram & Gazette USA TODAY NETWORK

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When I lived in New York City, the view from my kitchen window was framed by a tremendous scarlet oak (*Quercus coccinea*) who towered over the brick homes below — a 150-year-old remnant from before the farmland and forests of the Bronx were built-up into city dwellings. The tree endured dramatic change and continued to anchor the space. The hustle and bustle of the neighborhood below was mirrored with wild activity in the canopy: a shifting cast of songbirds and woodpeckers, a family of portly racoons, and a nesting pair of kestrels all called the tree home. When planting new trees, I often think of the longevity and impact of this oak. The extra time and effort spent on proper tree planting is a small investment for the long dividends paid by a tree in the garden.

The old oak had luckily grown with ample distance from homes, sidewalks, and utility wires, but not all trees have such harmonious placement. Before planting, it is important to analyze the landscape. Inspect the prospective space, the available sunlight, the proximity to buildings, the condition of the soil, and other factors that your new resident tree will encounter in their (hopefully) long life. Select a tree species adapted to the site conditions and carefully narrow down the exact planting spot based on the mature height and width it can achieve. Give the tree room to spread branches and fill the space over time rather than planting for immediate impact.

Remember that a new tree you have purchased has already lived through a series of circumstances that shaped its growth thus far. I do a bit of tree detective work

before even putting a spade in the soil. Most young trees and shrubs are available to the home gardener in nursery pots where they have been grown in specialty potting soils that are fluffier and faster draining than any native soil they will encounter. Check these containerized trees for rootbound conditions. Pull or cut roots that have matted or coiled inside the pot to prevent them from continuing to spiral and constricting the tree in the ground. If a mat of fibrous roots has developed, carve off the exterior layer to stimulate new root growth into the surrounding soil after planting. Older, larger specimens are often delivered with a root ball dug directly out of a nursery field contained by a shroud of fabric and sturdy wire cage. In the case of these “balled and burlapped” trees, the majority of delicate, fine roots that do the lion’s share of absorbing water are often cleaved off during the digging process and depending on where the tree was originally grown, the soil may have drastically different characteristics from their new home. On the other hand, specialty nurseries may ship young trees bare-root with no potting mix or field soil at all.

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Give your tree some compassion: like a child moving to a new school, the move to your landscape can be foreign and frightening for a newly planted tree. Your tree is not adapted to the strange soil, water, and sunlight of their new garden home. They may have had a steady diet of fertilizer or spent their winters in more southern locales. It is your job to fully immerse the tree into the conditions of their new home while minimizing the shock of the move.

Here are a few key tree planting steps for success:

● Plant during spring or fall to allow the tree to set new roots when soil moisture is high and the likelihood of extreme temperature swings is lower.

- Prepare a hole twice the diameter of the root ball. The depth of the hole should be measured so that the root-flare, the area at the base of the trunk where it begins to widen, is level with the surrounding soil.
- Provide abundant water for at least the first year but ideally for the first three years after planting. A newly planted tree is less tolerant of drought than one with fully established roots.
- Don't overlook step three. Abundant water is essential.
- Be patient! Establishing roots should be a gradual process, so quell any expectations for rapid growth the first season and simply enjoy your new tree as they take their time.

Gardening Central Mass. offers ecologically focused tips and helpful stories for home gardeners from New England Botanic Garden at Tower Hill CEO Grace Elton and Director of Horticulture Steven Conaway. Located in Boylston, New England Botanic Garden creates experiences with plants that inspire people and improve the world. Learn more at www.nebg.org. The column is published on the third Sunday of the month.