



08/02/10 Tree Planting Guide

Here are some pointers to help you plan and carry out a simple small tree planting scheme.

Before you start...

Ask yourself some questions:

- are you likely to have difficulty keeping your trees regularly weeded, tended and protected during their first few years of establishment?
- is your chosen site a valuable feature as it is, such as a wild flower meadow or wetland area, which would be best left un-planted?
- does your site conceal an important historical or archaeological feature such as an earthwork or structure that would be damaged by trees?
- will the roots of the trees cause damage later to walls, drains or underground services?
- will the shade cast cause nuisance to tees and greens or block views when the trees mature?
- will overhead wires become entangled with the trees?
- is the site so exposed that no trees grow in the area nearby?
- is your site underneath the shade of existing mature trees?
- is the site often water-logged?

If the answer to any of these is yes, then think again!

Timing...

In general, the best time for planting trees is late winter or early spring (December – early March). If that doesn't fit your schedule, then aim for planting trees in autumn. Summer's a bad choice, because the weather's too hot and the actively growing trees too susceptible to damage. Weather also restricts your options in the winter (at least in Scotland), because the cold causes the ground to freeze. If you've had the foresight to do all your digging ahead of time (before the ground freezes), it's not impossible to plant trees in winter. But unless you can water them sufficiently, early-to-mid winter is not the best planting time, either.

Planting trees when they're dormant is advisable, since that's when handling them is least disruptive to the trees. When do trees go dormant? In Scotland, trees begin to enter dormancy at some point in the autumn and begin to leave it at some point in the spring.

Where to start...

Deciduous trees and shrubs: buy small bare-rooted transplants, 60-90 cm in height (2' - 3') which are cheap, easy to transport and plant, and establish quickly. Evergreen trees and shrubs are available either bare-rooted or in small pots. Generally, you don't need to spend money on large standard or pot-grown trees which are expensive, cumbersome and prone to die-back under stress - invest your resources in good site preparation and good after-care instead.

Selecting the right species...

For a countryside planting scheme, have a look at what is already growing well in your neighbourhood - that gives a good guide to what suits the character and wildlife of the area and will stand a better chance of survival. For further information please contact SGEG directly.

Where to buy them:

See Flora Locale (www.floralocale.org.uk) or contact SGEG direct (www.sgeg.org.uk)

What about accessories?

Guards, shelters, stakes etc can also be obtained from nurseries and tree suppliers - but only use these if you really need to. You must protect the trees from rabbits (which will gnaw the bark off within days and kill the lot) so if you have rabbits, use a spiral plastic rabbit guard held in place with a small bamboo cane - cost about 60p. Or use a tree shelter (the plastic boxes which fit over trees) with a small stake for rabbit protection and added growth enhancement - cost about £1 a set (but not advised for exposed coastal sites).

Generally, don't stake your trees - it only encourages them to grow weak and spindly. And don't use fertilisers and bone-meal - infertility is seldom a problem when planting trees in the correct area.

Moving and storing trees

Treat your trees gently. Don't let the frost get at the roots. Above all, don't let the root hairs dry out even for a short time - keep the trees well wrapped during transport and storage and if you cannot plant them within a week of receiving them, heel them in by standing the trees in a trench and cover the roots with soil. *Common mistakes: leaving the trees hanging around in bags so that they dry out; leaving the roots out in the wind and sun at planting time.*

Site preparation.

Clear brambles, nettles and other weeds from the planting site. If the soil has been compacted then it will need ripping or cultivating to allow the passage of air, water and roots!

Layout and spacing.

Small trees are usually planted at 2 - 3 metre spacings. (Why so dense? Allowing for some dying or failing to flourish, you are still left with a good choice of fine trees to grow on. The denser planting also encourages upward competition between the trees, leading them to gain height rather than just spreading outwards.)

When planning layout, remember: don't plant under the shade of existing trees - most trees need full daylight overhead to thrive. Also, don't plant right up against paths, fences and walls - they bush out as they grow.

An informal layout, avoiding straight lines, is usually the most appropriate. Where you are planting a mixture of species, aim to plant trees of each species in a small group (say 4 - 5 of species A, then 4 - 5 of species B, then 4 - 5 of species C, then 4 - 5 of species A again).

Planting the trees.

Dig a hole big enough for the roots to spread out. Loosen the soil at the bottom. Bash in a cane or stake in the middle of the hole if you are going to use a guard or shelter. Hold the tree upright with one hand, with the root collar at ground level, and back-fill the hole with crumbled soil with the other hand. Gently shake the roots as you back-fill to settle the soil around them. Finally firm the soil down really hard with your boot so that the tree doesn't work loose later. Do back-fill up to ground level - don't leave the tree standing in a dip that will collect water. Fit the guard or shelter if you are using one.

Common mistakes: trees planted too deep (stem will rot) or too shallow (roots showing) or not vertical (will grow in a curve) or not firmed down enough; rabbit guards or shelters flopping around loose or pulling the tree over.

After-care - the important bit!

There are three key things which will determine whether your tree planting will be a success or failure:

1. Weed control - especially grass which competes for soil moisture
2. Weed control - and that doesn't mean just cutting the grass which only makes matters worse
3. Weed control - it means removing, suppressing or killing the weeds completely in a metre diameter circle around each tree.

Because the main threat to tree survival and growth is drought stress in our dry springs and summers, when weeds actively transpire the moisture out of the soil. Simply cutting grass only encourages it to grow and transpire more vigorously, at the trees' expense.

Mulching is fine. Use straw, grass cuttings, old carpet, black polythene or mulch mats (but don't pile up against the tree stem).

Hoeing or cultivating is fine but labour intensive.

Cutting taller weeds is fine, if it stops bracken, nettles, brambles, etc over-topping or smothering the trees.

Herbicide use (with care) is fine - a spot treatment of “tumbleweed” or similar glyphosate based herbicide applied in April or May - but read and follow the instructions carefully and don't let the herbicide touch the trees!

Common mistakes: allowing trees to become neglected and overgrown with weeds; mowing and strimming around the base of trees; damaging the bark with strimmer cord or mowing machinery. Strimmers also damage tree roots due to vibrations.