

GREEN END UP (BROWN END DOWN) A Guide To Planting Trees

Planting trees involves some science and a fair amount of art. The nursery people differ on the details and they all have good reasons for their approaches. You're best off asking your nursery if you have questions. But if you want a second opinion, here is what Growing Friends of Helena does:

Buy trees appropriate for this climate

The Townsend and Helena area is in the U.S. Department of Agriculture Hardiness Zone 4a, so you are plenty safe with Zone 2 and 3 plants. Zone 4 plants usually work, too; it all depends on your microclimate. Make sure the plants you choose were grown on tree farms in areas as cold and dry as Montana. Most of all, talk with your nursery.



Think before you dig

Don't dig up your gas line! Call 1-800-424-5555 for a free locate service for underground power, gas, and communication lines. In Townsend, you need to call the City Office at 266-3911 to have your water line located. You are, however, responsible for locating your own underground lawn sprinkler lines. Don't plant an oversized tree under a power line or to near a traffic sign or light pole.

Leave at least 5 feet between your tree and the underground utility line to get a backhoe in if repairs are needed in the future. If you have an old leaky sewer line, leave more room and choose trees whose roots aren't so invasive. If you have a new PVC line, you can worry less about roots.



Spacing of trees is somewhat a personal preference. Most professionals recommend you don't plant trees too close to the house or too close to each other that mature trees will touch. If you do, the trees won't develop award-winning shapes and could cause maintenance problems. Even so, some of us like trees close together like in the old parts of town.

Dig the hole big enough

"Big enough" means bigger than the root ball of the tree. How much bigger depends on your philosophy and how hard it is to dig. We recommend digging at least a few inches wider all the way around and a few inches deeper. Others recommend even bigger holes. It's important to loosen up the soil at the bottom of the hole. A shovel may be the only tool you need, but a spud bar (which is a big, heavy steel pole) can be handy for prying out big rocks.

Loosen up the root ball

If the tree has been potted for a while, it can be root bound, with roots entwining the outside of the ball. Just take the edge of your shovel and cut gashes all around the root ball before you plant. A tree that was potted this spring will be plenty loose in the potting mixture, maybe even so loose it falls away from the soil. Don't panic. Just get it covered (gently!) right away so the sun doesn't scald it. Better yet, buy well-rooted specimens.

Backfill with something

Use the darkest, least rocky soil from the hole you just dug plus compost. Or backfill with clean dirt you got from the nursery or wherever. Don't backfill with pure compost. Tamp the soil down as you backfill; be sure you leave no air pockets. If you toss sod back in the hole, make sure the green portion is toward the side of the hole and away from the tree roots. No fertilizer the first year. The Townsend Tree Board recommends adding wood-based compost, organic fertilizer, an iron-supplement, and bone meal to the dirt.



Plant the tree at the right depth

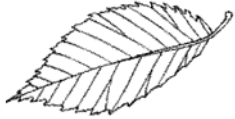
Generally the top of the soil in the pot should sit level with the ground. Planting trees too deep is a major cause of death in planted trees. If your tree has been grafted, which most deciduous trees are, you can see an obvious scar at the bottom of the trunk, right above the roots. Make sure the graft sits an inch or so above the ground level. Otherwise, you'll get suckers growing out of the bottom. To make watering easier, you can build up basin walls three or four inches around the edge of the hole.



Water your tree!

You can fill the hole with water and let it soak before you plant, which can be quick but dirty (or slow but dirty), or you can backfill most of the way to the top, soak slowly, then backfill the rest of the way. Soak long enough to get water to the bottom of the hole. Don't pack the dirt around the hole with your feet.

Stake your tree



Staking your tree is a good idea, especially if it's been potted this year, if you live in a high wind area, or if you have lots of kids or deer around. Generally, the larger the tree or the bigger the root ball, the less need to stake it. A couple of 2x 2's from the lumber yard make the easiest, quickest stakes. They'll rot out in a few years and should be removed then. Trees that grow in a clump don't need to be staked.

Use weed eater guards

More trees are lost to weed eaters than any other cause. Don't assume you can be careful enough and don't assume lawn service folks will be careful enough. The plastic guards are available at any nursery and well worth it.

Water some more!

Keep watering. Water it every few days for the first couple of weeks. After that, a new tree needs to be soaked at least once a week, and sometimes more. The hotter it is, the more you water. If the leaves still look droopy after the sun starts to set, you need to water. (However, remember that heavy clay soils need less water. It's difficult but definitely possible to drown a tree in the Townsend /Helena area). Stop your watering in September to harden the tree off, and then soak it again after the leaves drop off. Next spring, start watering when the tree buds out, but not before. You can water evergreens all year round.

Wrap young trees in winter

Young broadleaf trees should be wrapped with tree wrap after the leaves fall to prevent sun scald. Young maples are susceptible to papery bark and need to be wrapped. Remove the wrap in spring when the buds start to swell.

