

Autumn is a good time to plant deciduous trees. However, the question I am often asked is, “Which is better, planting a tree in the spring or planting one in the autumn?”

In Zone 5, we must realize that our soil is likely to freeze during the dead of winter. Sometimes for short durations, but it will freeze. I will touch more on this important aspect later, but first, let us examine the pros and cons of each planting.

Spring planting seems plausible, since most other types of planting takes place in the spring. For example, I have never heard of Nebraska farmers planting corn in the fall. Additionally, seasoned gardeners know that if they planted tomatoes in the fall, absolute failure would result. One could argue that spring is also the best time since most nurseries and garden centers have the largest selection from which to choose. It also seems logical that planting in the spring gives a tree the opportunity to grow all summer in preparation for the ravages of winter. However, one must realize that soon after planting in the spring, leaves will develop, and they must be able to undergo photosynthesis all summer. Furthermore, when a tree is planted in the spring, it also needs to make new roots. Spring planting dictates that the tree needs both: new leaves and new roots—all at the same time. Both growth processes require sugar reserves that are generally stored in the roots of the tree. Moreover, lots of water is needed. With a limited root system, a spring-planted tree deals with both demands; each, if not adequately provided, could cause the tree to suffer.

Many so-called experts claim that planting trees in the fall is better. In the fall, temperatures are usually cooler and roots grow better in cool soil. In addition, water requirements are much lower with no leaves on the tree. The tree will be able to grow new roots without having to grow new leaves. Fall planting gives the tree adequate time for the development of a quality root system. Then, when spring arrives, the root system will be better prepared for the high demands of water and nutrients from the leaves.

Although fall planting allows better root growth, the question is, “Will it better survive the winter than a spring planted tree?” After all, as I stated earlier, in Zone 5, the soil will freeze in winter and will have an effect on a fall-planted tree.

Two factors highly influence a fall-planted tree's success. They are the condition of the tree before it was planted and how well it was cared for after it was planted.

Availability of fresh tree stock should be considered. For example, did the tree sit months in a nursery where it did not receive proper care such as adequate watering throughout the summer months? Did the tree growing in a pot all summer long develop circular, bound roots?

Keep in mind, even after planting a quality tree in the fall, growing roots requires water for reliable growth. For a fall-planted tree to be successful, the tree needs ample water right up to the time the ground freezes. Then, if one does not mulch the tree after the ground freezes, dry soil and exposure to cold could be serious threats to the tree's survival.

Thus, I would argue that both spring and autumn are equally good times to plant a tree. Keep in mind, if fall planting is done, the soil needs to be watered well and mulched to prevent freeze damage during the winter months. Actually, the same applies to trees planted in spring.