

TREE CARE DO's and DON'Ts

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We are moving into tree care season. There are good to use care practices for trees, but there are practices often used or promoted that actually harm trees and are best avoided.

Tree care practices to avoid include injecting trees with chemicals for diseases or insects as a precaution, fertilizing trees growing in fertilized lawns, piling deep mulch against tree trunks, under or overwatering, and waiting 10 to 20 years after planting to prune trees.

Tree care practices to use include planting at the proper depth, using three to four inches of organic mulch in a six-foot diameter ring around trees, watering to the correct depth when needed, and pruning young trees as they grow to avoid problems and to help develop strong structure.

For information on pruning young trees, plan to attend a pruning demonstration on April 9 at 5:30 PM at St. Bonaventure church. Extension Master Gardener volunteers and I will demonstrate what and where to prune and how to train young trees for good structure. We can answer other tree questions too.

On practices to avoid, here are reasons they are harmful. Injecting trees with fungicides or insecticides as a precaution needs to be avoided. Injections wound trees and while wounds seal, they never heal. If a tree is injected year after year, the damage caused eventually leads to tree decline. Do not wound a tree unless there is a justifiable reason for doing so; and that includes pruning.

Most trees should have a specific pest problem before being treated via injection. If someone says a healthy tree needs to be treated to prevent it from getting a pest, you are likely receiving poor advice unless it is an ash tree. Some disease and insect issues are minor enough that treatment is rarely recommended. If needed, injection may not be the best application method to use.

On fertilizing, most soils in Nebraska are fertile enough for tree growth and fertilization is not needed. Trees growing in lawns are fertilized every time the lawn is fertilized, which is more than trees need. Save your money and your trees health by not adding additional fertilizer. Trees overfertilized with nitrogen are more prone to attack by diseases and insects.

Mulch volcanoes, or piling deep mulch against tree trunks, are best avoided. Mulch holds moisture against the trunk and this can promote infection by decay organisms. Deep mulch also makes a nice winter home for voles to gnaw on tree trunks during winter.

Mulch trees to protect trunks from lawn mowers and weed trimmers and promote root growth. Just make sure it is only three to four inches deep and not piled against the trunk. Avoid using landscape fabric with rocks around tree trunks as these can girdle or damage trunks as they grow.

On watering, people often say their trees are fine because they water their lawn. Many turf irrigation systems do not moisten soil deep enough to fully benefit trees in drought years. And many automatic systems run too frequently, keeping the upper soil too wet. This reduces oxygen in soil and harms tree and turf roots.

Correct watering of turf and trees is only watering when soil is dry or almost dry, then watering deep. For turfgrass, deep is about six inches due to shallower roots. For trees, it is 12 to 18 inches. Insert a screw driver into soil to estimate moisture. It will penetrate easily to depth of moisture and feel cool to the touch when removed.

And for a reminder on tree planting depth, determine how deep to dig the hole before digging and never loosen soil beneath the root ball. Remove the tree from its container, then remove soil on top of the root ball until you find the first lateral root growing off the trunk. Only dig the hole deep enough so that first root is just at, below or above the soil line. Dig the hole wider than the root ball, but no deeper.