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How to Grow an Arborvitae Tree



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Planting, Growing, and Pruning Arborvitae

By [Catherine Boeckmann](#)
Last Updated: August 11, 2024



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Arborvitae are a popular, rugged ever-green tree with dense blue-green foliage. It's commonly used in home landscaping, often to provide privacy. Here's how to plant, grow, and prune arborvitae.

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About Arborvitae

The elegant **American arborvitae** (*Thuja occidentalis*) is native to North America, and the tree is hardy in zones 2 to 7. [What planting hardiness zone do you live in?](#)

The most common varieties have a narrow pyramid shape that makes a natural choice for privacy hedges and windbreaks at the edge of gardens. Their dense foliage can create almost a "living wall."

Dwarf and miniature cultivars make excellent accent plants or foundation plantings, too.

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Arborvitae will add color and texture to your landscape, and are sometimes even trimmed into topiary plants. Plus, easy care requirements make this a rewarding plant to grow. [Learn more about landscaping your property with trees.](#)

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PLANTING

When to Plant Arborvitae

- Plant in early spring when the soil can be worked or in the fall before the ground freezes.

Where to Plant Arborvitae

- Choose a location in full sun or partial shade with at least six hours of direct sunlight daily, preferably early in the day.
- These trees get “thirsty” and prefer moist soil. So, plant the trees in a place that has access to watering until established and doesn’t get too dry.
- Arborvitae are slow-growing, but some varieties can grow as tall as 60 feet, so consider their height at maturity when planting near any structures or powerlines.
- Well before planting, amend the soil by digging in about 2 inches of compost or aged manure.

IT IS A TREE . . .

- Dig the planting hole 2 to 3 times as wide and as deep as the root ball.
- Loosen some of the roots in the root ball.
- Plant the arborvitae in the hole so that the top edge of the root ball is level with the top of the hole.
- Back-fill with soil around the root ball, tamping down with your hands.
- Soak the soil in the hole when you have filled it $\frac{1}{2}$ full.
- Finish filling to the top edge of the root ball.
- Water deeply. [Learn more about how to water your plants for healthy growth.](#)
- Add a 2-inch layer of aged shredded wood mulch or pine straw around the arborvitae to conserve moisture. Avoid placing mulch directly against the stem.

GROWING

How to Grow Arborvitae

- Keep the soil consistently moist during

soil dry out, but be careful not to over-
water.

- Established arborvitae will require extra water only during prolonged periods of drought.
- Use stakes for support as newly planted arborvitae are vulnerable to wind.
- Fertilize the arborvitae in the spring with a slow-release high-nitrogen shrub/tree fertilizer.

How to Prune Arborvitae

- Arborvitae do not require a lot of pruning.
- Plants that are used in formal hedges and foundation plantings can be trimmed with hedge shears to shape and spur new growth.
- Prune in early spring before new growth emerges.
- Trim from the bottom up.
- Shorten branches that are expanding beyond the desired length.
- Prune damaged branches anytime.

How to Propagate Arborvitae

- Cut 4 to 5 inch cuttings from the current year's branch growth.
- Remove the leaves on the bottom half of the cutting.
- Fill a small pot with organic soil mix or a mixture of sand and peat moss.
- Stick the cutting into rooting hormone and then into the pot.
- Water and cover the pot with a plastic dome or clear plastic wrap.
- Place the pot in a location with filtered light.
- Water if the soil gets dry.
- It will take 6 to 8 weeks for the roots to form.
- Remove the plastic covering.
- Transplant into a bigger pot with soil.
- Plant outdoors the following spring.

Types

The American arborvitae is a tall, dense, broad-pyramidal evergreen. This native tree can reach heights of 40' to 60'.

Choose plants with strong central stems to avoid damage from wind, snow or ice.

— —

has scale-like foliage. It will tolerate a wide range of soil types as long as periodic deep watering is provided.

- **'Emerald Green'** is a favorite for hedges. It grows to 15 feet tall and 4 feet wide, forming a tall column of brilliant green foliage.
- **'Art Boe'** also called North Pole arborvitae is a narrow upright shrub. It can grow for years in a container or if planted in the ground, it grows to 15 feet.
- **'Hetz Midget'** is a hardy dwarf that reaches 3 to 4 feet tall. Its naturally round form makes it ideal for foundation plantings.
- **'Tom Thumb'** is a miniature and grows only 12 to 15 inches tall. It is a dense multi-stemmed shrub with a rounded form, perfect for containers or rock gardens.

GARDENING PRODUCTS



PESTS/DISEASES

Insect pests

- Spider mites
- Bagworms (occasionally)
- Arborvitae leafminer

Animal pests

- Deer
- Red squirrel

Diseases

WIT AND WISDOM

- The name *arborvitae* is the Latin form of the French *l'arbre de vie*, which means “tree of life.”
- The genus name, *Thuja*, is from a Greek word for perfume.
- Arborvitae was the first North American tree to be introduced to Europe.
- Other names for arborvitae include northern white-cedar, eastern white-cedar, and swamp-cedar.
- The oldest living arborvitae is over 1,000 years old.
- Native Americans made baskets from the roots and used the leaves in tea.
- The wood is used for log cabins, fence posts, shingles, paneling, canoes, and wood crafting.

SHRUBS AND TREES

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Catherine Boeckmann loves nature, stargazing, and gardening so it's not surprising that she and The Old Farmer's Almanac found each other. She leads digital content for the Almanac website, and is also a certified master gardener in the state of Indiana. [Read More from Catherine Boeckmann](#)

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COMMENTS

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Virginia (not verified) 1 week 1 day ago

Hello! I'm a new homeowner and would like to use emerald greens to create a privacy fence.

However, I was thinking about planting them in

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about planting them by is fairly close to buried gas and electrical lines. But it's also the perfect area to create the privacy wall. Help!

REPLY

Joan (not verified) 10 months 2 weeks ago

The little buds on the arborvitae branches, are those seedlings or just new growth on the plant? I wanted to see if I could grow from these buds or is the stem cutting the easiest or best way? Thank you!

REPLY

The Editors 10 months 2 weeks ago

Hi Joan,

Arborvitae do produce seeds, typically on older plants, but without seeing exactly what you are talking about it is hard to say what it is you are looking at. If what you are seeing is the early stages of arborvitae cones,

early fall, at which point they'll be ready for harvest.

Arborvitae can certainly be grown from seed, but due to genetic variations, you may not end up with the same variety if grown from seed. If you want to produce the same plant as you have now, it is best to take a cutting in late summer or fall and follow the instructions above. It is also a little easier to propagate from cuttings than seeds.

Hope this helps!

REPLY

Sharon Brown (not verified) 10 months 3 weeks ago

I recently passed by my old house and noticed the Arborvitae I had planted near a kitchen window was gone. After reading this article, I now know why. I'm sorry poor tree! I didn't know any better back then! You were beautiful!

REPLY

Catherine (not verified) 1 year 2 months ago

Can you transplant a mature arborvitae in the early spring?

REPLY

The Editors 1 year 2 months ago

Hi Catherine,

You can transplant your arborvitae in the spring. Of course, depending on its size and age, transplanting at any time of the year might be tricky.

When transplanting in the spring, you will want to wait until the threat of frost has passed and the soil is workable.

Prior to transplant day there are a few steps you will want to take. The day before transplanting, you should

hole and fill it with water. When decide to transplant, you should do so under overcast skies or during cooler evening hours. Just before digging your arborvitae from its current location, water it again. Once your arborvitae is in place, make sure you water while filling the hole with dirt and water again after it is fully planted.

Check the plant daily for the first couple of weeks as transplants may require watering every day—if not more. Make sure to check the soil for dryness a few inches below the surface to determine if more water is needed.

REPLY

deerlovingmytrees (not verified) 2 years ago

I have several arborvitae, probably 20 feet tall). The deer have eaten all the green off the bot-

REPLY

The Editors 2 years ago

Yes, it is okay to trim away any dead branches that are the result of the deer damage. But arborvitae do have the ability to produce new buds and it might be best to wait until early summer to see if anything will grow on the lower branches. If not, you can prune your arborvitae to remove those bare branches. Moving forward, you might want to consider putting up a deterrent (i.e. fencing) around the bottom of your trees to prevent any further damage in the future.

REPLY

Judith Davies (not verified) 4 years 5 months ago

We had the most beautiful fence of Arborvitae at our home in Wilbraham, Ma. Until one year

deer love Arborvitae !! And, I guess, we didn't mind all that much...they are such beautiful creatures. My husband always said..."wait till spring, you won't love them so much then !" But we always did ! We live in Florida now and will always miss NE and the changing seasons. Happy Thanksgiving !

REPLY

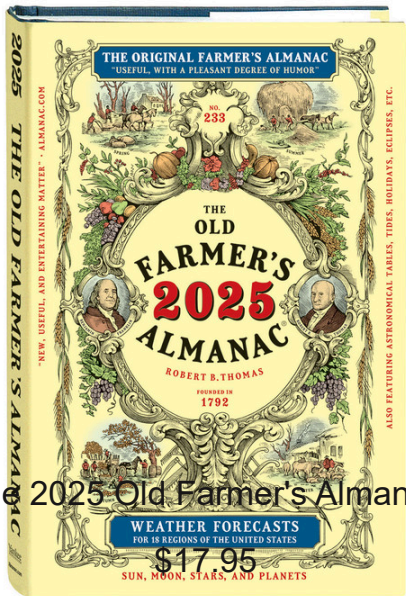
Mike (not verified) 4 years 5 months ago

Probably everyone with a garden has some arborvitae already but if not, get some! Plan on 5 to 7 years for maximum height and width. Rarely will you need to prune, if at all. Once established, they are nearly care free. I haven't fertilized them at all but reading the article, I suppose I could. I give a nice, long drink with a slow running hose near the base of each tree 2 or 3 times a season if it's on the dry side, maybe 5 minutes each. Spiders and spider mites, as mentioned, do seem to like making them home. I leave the spiders alone, they are harmless. Had spider mites twice, but not this year. The solution is very easy, just spray down

ner, etc. I do clean out debris from underneath in spring and fall so the trunk isn't smothered - leaf blower makes it easy. As with anything, tend carefully the first year after planting. Once established, they're usually good to go.

REPLY

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