

How to Plant a Tree the Right Way (8 Steps Total)

Planting a tree isn't just about digging a hole and placing it in. When done properly, tree planting can help the tree thrive for decades. Follow these steps to give your tree the best possible start.

Step 1: Choose the Right Tree for Your Location

Before planting, consider the climate, soil type, and sunlight in your area. Some trees thrive in full sun, while others prefer partial shade. Also, think about the tree's mature size—avoid planting large trees too close to buildings, power lines, or underground utilities. A little research now will prevent major issues later.

Step 2: Pick the Best Planting Spot

Once you've selected the tree, find a planting spot that offers the right amount of light and space. Make sure the area drains well—avoid locations where water tends to pool after rain. Check that the soil isn't too compacted and that there's enough room for the tree's roots to spread out comfortably.

Step 3: Prepare the Tree and Tools

Unpack your tree from its container or burlap wrap. If it's in a plastic pot, gently slide it out. Loosen the root ball slightly by using your hands or a small tool to tease apart circling roots. This helps the roots spread into the surrounding soil instead of continuing in tight loops. Also, gather your tools: a shovel, gardening gloves, water, mulch, and possibly stakes for support.

Step 4: Dig a Wide, Shallow Hole

Dig a hole that is twice as wide as the root ball but no deeper than its height. This width gives roots space to grow outward, while the proper depth prevents the tree from sinking too low. Place the tree in the center of the hole. The top of the root ball should be level with or just slightly above the surrounding ground. Planting too deep is a common mistake that can suffocate roots.

Step 5: Position and Straighten the Tree

Before filling the hole, step back and check the tree from all angles. Make sure it's standing straight—this matters more than you might think! Ask a friend to help hold the tree in place if necessary. Adjust its position so that the best-looking side of the tree faces your preferred direction, such as toward your house or garden path.

Step 6: Fill the Hole and Firm the Soil

Begin filling the hole with the original soil you dug out, gently tamping it down as you go to remove air pockets. Don't press too hard—compacting the soil too much can block water and air. Water the soil halfway through the process to help it settle, then finish filling and gently firm the top layer.

Step 7: Water Deeply and Add Mulch

Right after planting, give the tree a thorough watering. This helps the roots settle in and encourages contact between the roots and the soil. Then, apply a 2–3 inch layer of mulch in a circle around the base of the tree—but keep the mulch a few inches away from the trunk. This mulch helps retain moisture, regulate soil temperature, and reduce weed growth.

Step 8: Monitor and Care for the Tree

For the first year, your new tree will need regular care. Water it deeply once or twice a week, especially during dry spells. Check the soil moisture by sticking your finger a few inches into the ground. Avoid fertilizing in the first year—focus on root development instead. If necessary, stake the tree for support, but be sure to remove the stakes after one year to prevent girdling. With patience and care, your tree will grow strong and healthy for years to come.