

Todd Dwyer's Guide to Woody Perennial Placement, Preparation, and Planting

As with all things growing plants, you ask 100 people how to do “x”, and you will get “100x” answers. Below is my technique that I use, and have done so for a number of years with great success.

I claim none of these ideas as my own, but instead a following of the practices of those who came before and passed on their wisdom. This will apply to bare root and potted plantings.

We all want to get our perennials planted as soon as possible because they may take years to produce a crop. The catch is that you need to know your land well to place these long lived plants in the best location. Be as patient as you can be in choosing a spot, and only plant when you are as reasonably sure as you can be that you have made a sound decision.

Very Important:

For bare root or potted perennials, soak the roots in a bucket of cool water before planting to ensure the roots are totally hydrated.

1.) Start prepping the hole as far in advance as possible, a year or more if feasible. I use the method of either sheet mulching, or even faster, piling a few flakes of bailed alfalfa over the spot where I plan to plant my tree or shrub. Make the circle at least 2-3' in diameter for a shrub, and 3-4' for a tree. Pile the flakes on at least 8-10" deep, water well, and now begin examining your decision. Focused consideration, I find, is the best part of this method. You will have the time to figure out if your planting location is a good decision, or not, through long and thoughtful observation.

2.) You're confident in the wisdom of your decision, and you're ready to move forward. Remove the sheet mulch, or alfalfa flakes, and start digging. I prefer a spading fork (a stout, 4-tined fork designed specifically for digging) for this work as it digs as well as a digging spade but won't "glaze" the edges of the hole.

3.) Use the diameter measurements mentioned in Step #1, and regarding depth, dig a minimum depth of twice the length of the longest (tap) root on the plant.

4.) Save all of the soil from the hole onto a surface you can easily access. I prefer a wheelbarrow, large sheet of cardboard, or piece of old plywood. You will want to be able to scrape all of the soil off of this surface to put it back into the hole (so a tarp is not ideal).

5.) Mix a little bit of quality compost into the native soil, but I would recommend no more than a 1 part compost : 4 parts native soil ratio. If you make the soil in the hole too sweet, the woody perennial will not begin searching beyond the edges of its dug hole for necessary nutrients. 1 year of coddling is fine, more than that will not serve the plant well.

6.) Make a small pile (a compacted cone) of soil in the center of the hole that will allow the plant to be planted at the correct depth. The existing soil level should be just above the root crown, but below the grafting scar. Drape the roots around the "soil cone" so they are spread out evenly and will facilitate strong root growth.

7.) The correct depth is established, the supporting root structure is spread evenly over the "cone", and now you need to stake the tree. I like to stake (if using a single stake) at this stage so I can see the roots and I will not damage any of them. If you wait until the roots are buried, invariably you will destroy some roots as you put the stake into the earth. If you are going to stake with 2 or 3 supports outside the root ring, you can do this after the hole is filled. Lastly, the support stake should be deeper than the hole and more stout than the plant to ensure stability. Bind loosely with nursery tape.

8.) Begin refilling the hole, pressing the soil down every few shovel fulls. You won't over-compact the soil, but do be cautious to not damage the roots. More pressure can be applied as more soil is added. Water as you go to ensure deep watering and making sure there are no air pockets in the hole or around the roots. Continually check the planting depth to avoid planting too deep as the soil is compressed. In addition, be certain the plant is oriented plumb (vertically) so it can grow properly

9.) When you get to the last shovelfuls of soil, stomp the soil down to ensure soil-root contact. Thoroughly water the hole. You will not over-water a freshly planted perennial, so when I say "thoroughly" I mean it. Some very experienced plant wizards recommend watering to the point of "soupiness".

10.) Make sure the plant is planted to the correct depth, vertically oriented, well-staked, and thoroughly watered. Once you are certain with all of this, mulch the plant appropriately. This might mean a sheet mulch, or simply replacing the rotted alfalfa flakes back around the perennial. Leave a little space between the trunk and the mulch (1-2") to avoid issues of mold or disease.

11.) Wipe the sweat from your virtuous brow. Well done.