



5 Steps for Proper Tree Planting

Follow these best planting practices that will set your tree up for a long and healthy life.

Step 1: Dig The Hole

The hole you dig for your tree should be at least twice as wide as the container it came in, but only as deep as the root ball. Planting your tree too deep, by covering the root flare with soil, is a common mistake and can lead to disease or even death of your tree.

- ▶ Call before you dig! You should have called 811 to locate any underground utilities when you were choosing your planting site. If you haven't done that yet, be sure to call before you start digging. This can be an expensive mistake, so do not skip this step!
- ▶ Cut back any weed fabric at least 3 feet away from the edge of the hole. **Weed fabric is not permeable, and will restrict water and oxygen from reaching the tree or plant roots.**
- ▶ Dig the hole for your tree about twice as wide as the container and only as deep as the root ball so the root flare is level with the surrounding soil.
- ▶ Once the depth is about right for the root ball, fill the hole with water to wet the bottom and sides. Allow any standing water to soak in before setting your tree (step 3).

Step 2: Prepare Your Tree

Taking this extra step in preparing your tree will give it the best start possible. Things hanging or attached to a young tree can damage its tender bark.

- ▶ Remove all tags and any tape that is or was securing the trunk to a stake and remove the stake.
- ▶ **Prune for the 4 D's - dead, damaged, diseased or deranged (crossing/rubbing branches) that may exist in the structure of your young tree.**

- ▶ Remove the tree from its container and clear away the soil from the top of the root ball until you find the highest root which is called the root flare. **Sometimes trees are buried deep in their container!** Don't be afraid to remove lots of soil if needed to reach the root flare!

- ▶ Loosen the root ball allowing the roots to spread out. Use your hand pruners or a small pruning saw to cut all circling roots back to just before they begin to turn. Don't be afraid to remove soil from the root ball. Sometimes this means removing all the soil to bare root. These careful actions will stimulate growth and allow the tree to adapt to its new home more quickly. This will also affect the depth of your hole, depending on how much soil is removed.

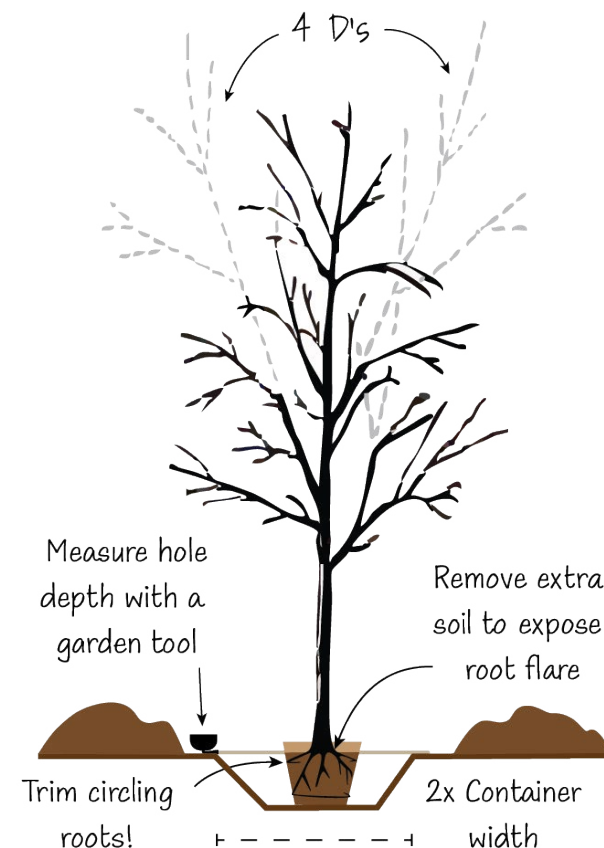
Step 3: Set Your Tree

Now it's time to plant your tree. Part of selecting the right tree for the right place includes matching soil conditions to tree preferences. Remember that soil type can vary within your yard and neighborhood. When it comes time to refill the hole, make sure you use the same soil that you just dug up. Horticultural experts in New Mexico **do not recommend adding fertilizers, compost or other soil amendments** that can burn young tree roots.

- ▶ Gently place your tree in the hole, lifting from the lowest part of the trunk.
- ▶ Measure the elevation of the root ball against the surrounding soil. Use the handle of a shovel or rake to judge the height of the root flare, which should sit just above the surrounding soil level. If the hole is too deep, use your shovel to fill in until it reaches the correct level. You should firmly tamp down any soil added to avoid settling, causing the tree to be planted too deep. If the root flare is too high, dig

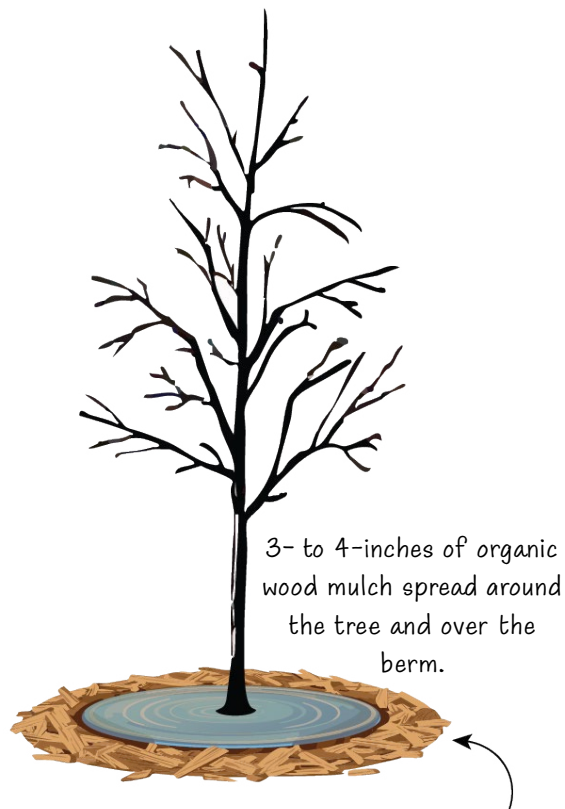
the hole deeper until you reach the appropriate depth. **This may take several tries to get the root flare at the correct level.**

- ▶ Place the tree upright in the hole with roots spreading out (wagon wheel appearance) and trunk's flare just slightly (1/2 to 1") above the surface of the surrounding ground. Check from two or three different angles that the tree is straight and not tilted.



Step 4: Backfill Around Your Tree

- ▶ Backfill the hole part way to secure the root ball in place, ensuring that the bottom foot of the tree trunk stays as perpendicular to the ground as possible. Tamp the soil lightly with your foot to make sure there are no holes and prevent settling. Gently add about 5 gallons of water to the hole making sure the pressure of the hose isn't disturbing the soil around the root ball or causing the placement of the tree to shift.
- ▶ As you water, gently but firmly rock the tree back and forth or in a circular motion to "mud in" the tree. You may see air bubbles come to the surface or sometimes openings appear. This will help bond the soil from the container and the surrounding native soils, locking your tree in place. Make sure that the tree is again positioned perpendicular to the ground level at the end of this action. Have others standing at two or three different angles to help you judge when the tree is straight.
- ▶ Continue alternating between backfilling the hole with the soil that was removed and watering until the soil level reaches just below the root flare. You will often feel at some point during this process, a sense of the soil grabbing hold of the tree and locking it into place. Once the soil level has just covered the top roots and reached the trunk's flare, you can stop. Be careful to not step on the newly wet soil to prevent compaction that will slow the root growth of your new tree.



3- to 4-inches of organic wood mulch spread around the tree and over the berm.

Create a small berm around the tree. This will help hold water in the root zone.

PRO TIP: Structural pruning is easiest when you can tip the tree over to reach the top, so make sure to do this before you plant your tree. [Check out this video](#) for more on structural pruning.

Step 5: Water & Mulch Your Tree

- ▶ Build a berm of soil 4- to 8-inches high around the tree to create a tree watering well, at least 3 feet from the trunk to hold in irrigation water. If you are on a slope, the downhill side of the berm will need to be taller than the uphill side. With water on low and slow, soak the entire area, filling the tree well and allowing it to soak in.
- ▶ Spread organic wood mulch 3- to 4-inches deep and out to the edge of the canopy and over the berm. Make sure the mulch is not touching the tree trunk, as this can harm your tree.
- ▶ Slowly and thoroughly wet mulch entirely. Multiple waterings will help the tree endure the trauma of being transplanted and help the mulch stay in place.
- ▶ If the soil is wet but the mulch is dry, the mulch can actually wick water from the ground. This is not what we want! We want the mulch to maintain the moisture in the soil. This wetting process ensures that the mulch is doing its job for this young tree.

STAKING TEST: Gently but firmly, rock the tree back and forth and note if only the trunk and canopy move freely, or if the rocking also includes the root ball like a ball in a socket joint. If the tree has not affixed itself to the soil in the hole and the root ball shifts back and forth, you will need to stake it. If you have to stake your tree, make sure to remove the stake one year after planting.

