



PLANT ESTABLISHMENT

A bit of help to get the best from your plants.

In most instances trees and shrubs will establish well after planting provided that they are suitably watered. The main factors that will impair establishment or even cause plants to fail, are improper location, poor root health, weather and unfavorable soil conditions. The first two seasons after planting are the most critical to the establishment of all plants.

The plants we supply are of the highest possible quality. If you experience any difficulties with your plant establishment please contact us immediately. We are always happy to help and give advice but please note that failure to notify us may invalidate our plant guarantee.

For full details of our plant guarantee please e-mail: info@thebigplantnursery.com

Watering is the key to success

After initial heavy watering at the time of planting, the soil around the newly installed plant should be kept moist (but not overly wet). In the winter months where the soil is naturally moist and cool, deciduous plants become dormant and won't need to be watered. Evergreens however will continue to take up water and it is essential that these receive sufficient water.

Frozen soil prevents the uptake of moisture so deep mulching around the plant(s) can be vital (especially with root-balled plants (see last page)).

When planting in the spring and summer it is critical that the soil around establishing plants does not dry out.

In hot weather this could mean as much as watering twice a day for larger plants (for the first month or so). Drip irrigation will be a massive time saver but additional watering may also be needed during the establishment phase.

As a general rule always water the soil rather than the foliage of the plant. This is best done in the early morning or evening when it is cooler and the sun is not as strong.

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creative landscape

Typical problems

After initial signs of growth, plants that are struggling to establish will often see their foliage begin to deteriorate. This is most prominent in early summer, with leaves wilting, turning yellow or brown, shriveling and falling. It can take place over several months or sometimes happen quite quickly.

If dealt with early this will only be a temporary setback and is rarely fatal. It should not be confused with evergreen plants that grow new leaves and shed the old ones around the same time. For more detailed guidance please see below.

Insufficient water

1. **Insufficient watering in the first two years after planting is the main cause of poor establishment.**
Nearby trees, shrubs and hedges can cast a rain shadow with thirsty, wide-ranging roots, leading to greater watering requirements than expected.
Remedy: Check moisture levels around roots with a trowel. Watering to soak the root zone requires at least the equivalent of four watering cans per square meter.
2. **Weeds, lawns and other vegetation intercept water before it reaches the roots.**
Remedy: Ideally keep a circle at least 1m in diameter around the plant that is vegetation free for three years after planting, using hoeing, weed killers or a thick mulch of fine composted bark.
3. **In hot, dry weather, plants lose moisture very quickly.**
Remedy: Cover the bare area around the base of the plant with a mulch of fine composted bark to help keep the soil cool, retain moisture and suppress weeds. This will also help to improve the soil structure over time.

Excessive water

1. **Poorly drained or waterlogged soil will kill many plants and trees.**
Remedy: Improve drainage where possible by aerating the soil around the plant or tree with a fork or try planting on a slightly raised mound and improving soil structure.
2. **Overwatering is as detrimental to tree establishment as under watering.**
Remedy: After the initial watering in, check soil moisture frequently (once or twice a week) but only water again when the soil is starting to dry. If you are unsure a soil moisture meter can be used. Less water is needed in still, dull weather conditions than in hot, windy ones.

Poor root systems

1. **Damage - Frosting, water logging or desiccation of the roots reduces the chances of success.**
Remedy: Keep newly purchased plants in a cool, but frost-free place, with their roots covered, until you can plant them.
2. **Poor container grown trees and shrubs can lead to congested, curled roots** which may fail to grow out into the surrounding soil.
Remedy: Try to avoid buying pot-bound plants, which are recognisable by congested roots when tipped out of the pot. If there are signs of root curling they can be teased out at the point of planting to encourage the roots to spread out.

Deep planting

1. **Positioning the plant too deep in the soil can lead to stem rotting and failure.**

Remedy: Scrape away surplus mulch and/or soil from the base of the trunk. In severe cases of deep planting, the tree may need to be lifted in the autumn and repositioned higher in the soil. When replanting, ensure the first flare of roots sits just below the soil surface, avoiding burying any of the bare stem. Keep mulches clear from the immediate base of all trees and shrubs – apply these from the edge of the root-ball outwards.

Compacted soil

1. **Roots fail to grow outwards into the surrounding soil if the soil is compacted.**

Remedy: Most new root development is out laterally into the surface layers of soil rather than straight down. It is therefore important that the soil in this zone is sufficiently loose and aerated with a fork to encourage root development. When preparing the planting pit dig the hole twice as wide as the root-ball.

Wind rock

1. **Wind rock of unsecured trees and shrubs can damage roots** and lead to water collecting in the 'socket' caused by the stem moving at soil level. This can lead to fatal rotting or the roots never establishing in the surrounding soil.

Remedy: Staking avoids this, but stakes should be no taller than one-third of the stem height and must be secure. Avoid excessively tight tree ties when securing stems to stakes, prevent rubbing of stems against stakes and ties, and remember to progressively slacken the ties as the stems grow. Windbreaks may be required in very exposed sites.

Plant nutrition

1. **Although a lack of nutrients is seldom involved in establishment problems**, it is worth applying a nutrient or fertiliser to the leaves (foliar feeding) in order to get some nutrients into the plant, even if roots are not fully functional. Fertiliser top dressings in late winter or early spring are also worth trying where other factors are clearly not to blame for poor growth. It is important that you do not over fertilise however as this can lead to problems for plants with under-developed root systems.

Larger specimens

Although larger sized specimen trees and shrubs can be perfect for making instant impact or screening, the root system is invariably undersized compared to the amount of top growth. They will require greater aftercare than smaller plants, especially with attention to watering. With proper aftercare however there is no reason why these should not establish any less successfully than smaller specimens.

Expect it to take two or even three seasons for large specimen trees and shrubs to be fully established.

Establishing root-ball plants

As the name suggests these are plants that are supplied in a 'root-ball' rather than a container.

These are often hedging plants, trees and larger specimens.

Root-ball plants are generally much more economical than container plants as they are lifted from the ground to order rather than grown in a container.

These plants need particular care to help them establish a new root system in their new location.

Root-ball plants are normally only available for planting in the winter months between November and March.

Aftercare is much the same as described previously however take care to follow these few additional points when planting root-ball plants:

Protect your plants from frost

If you are unable to plant your new root-balled plants immediately just keep them in a sheltered location with their roots protected from the worst of the winter weather. Use some hessian or an old blanket until you get a chance to plant them.

Water is still key

If you are planting in the spring (late February/March), then it is important that the root balls are watered most days (for the first month) - twice a day for larger plants on warmer days. This will help the plant establish a root system whilst the ground is warming up.

Pruning

It is common in the first few seasons after planting for root ball plants to suffer minor 'die back'. This is due to damage to the root system when the plants were lifted from the ground. This is often seen on the growing tips of the plant and should be pruned out to promote new growth in spring.

With hedge plants pruning the leading stem or branches at the top of the plant will encourage new growth lower down and as a result increase the density.