

Success with Tree Seedlings

Did you plant a seedling tree, perhaps for Arbor Day or Earth Day? Maybe you put them out in the yard where you want them to grow up. Or maybe you put them in a seedling nursery bed until you are ready to transplant them. Your seedling looks so small and vulnerable out there in the big world. Here are a few steps to keep your new them happy and safe.

Settling in

During the first few weeks after planting check on your seedlings several times a week and make sure they are settled in. Often in planting we inadvertently leave large air pockets during the backfilling process. These air pockets can mean that roots aren't making contact with moist soil. Look for suspicious wilting. Feel the soil. If it is dry or slightly moist water well, sometimes the movement of water through soil is enough to wash soil into these large air gaps. Resist the urge to unearth and move your seedlings once planted. New root hairs will develop quite soon after planting and they are fragile. You can always move your seedling in the fall or the following spring.

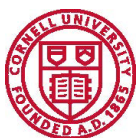
Water. How much is enough? In general plants in our area need one inch of rain per week. The weather will sometimes oblige but use a rain gauge to be sure you are getting an inch of rain per week. If not, you will have to supply the water. This might be a big task if you have many seedlings spread over a large landscape. Remember it is better to water deeply once a week, than to water lightly and frequently. If you use a bucket to water, you'll know exactly how much you've given each tree seedlings



Woody tree and shrub seedlings are shipped bare-root, and often covered with moist paper and gel to protect delicate root hairs from drying

Photo: Katie Grzesiak, Grand Traverse Conservation District, Bugwood.org

Mulch Your seedling will do best if the soil moisture level is kept constant. Mulching around the planting area will help maintain soil moisture. It will also suppress weed growth, giving your seedling some elbowroom. As the mulch breaks down, it adds organic matter in the soil, supplying your seedling with nutrients.



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Winter protection. Mulch also helps to buffer temperature-changes in the soil. This is especially applicable in the winter when the freeze and thaw cycle can heave poorly rooted seedlings out of the ground. Exposed roots systems dry out quickly and the seedlings will soon perish.

Fence. You may also want to consider a fence or physical barrier to keep browsing animals from nibbling off new growth. A fence or collar will keep overzealous weed-whackers from getting too close to the seedling. Fences can be made of coated wire fencing, chicken wire, or plastic netting, on a sturdy frame. Make sure your mulch ring extends out beyond the fencing so that you can mow close and not so wide that you can't reach the weeds that may spring up within the fenced area

When is it time to transplant? Move your plant out of the nursery bed and into the landscape within 2-3 years so that the roots it has developed are still relatively short. Ideally you want to dig up and move the plant with roots and soil intact. If you transplant in early spring, when leaf buds are still dormant, you can successfully move the transplant bare root.

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