Careful Monitoring Key To New Tree Survival

Landscape trees provide beauty and utility, but the care they receive during the first few years after planting is critical to their growth success.

Mulching is the most important post-planting practice that can improve the health and vitality of landscape plants. Research has shown a 2-3 inch application of wood chip mulch nearly doubles plant growth in the first few years after planting. Mulch conserves moisture and insulates roots from heat and cold extremes. Proper mulching provides a well-groomed appearance to new plantings, eliminates grass or weed competition and prevents damage from mowers and weed trimmers.

Desirable mulching materials include wood chips, wood shavings, bark or equivalent materials. Coarse-textured organic mulches are preferred since they tend to aerate the soil and replenish soil nutrients as they decompose. Apply a 2-3 inch mulch layer, with a diameter of at least 2 feet. Caution must be used when applying mulch since a layer greater that 4 inches thick may provide an excellent habitat for small rodents. If damage from rodents occurs, it may be necessary to use pesticides, change the mulching method or eliminate mulching. Heavy mulching also can be a problem in poorly drained or wet sites where moisture can remain at high levels for extended periods and cause root dieback. Also, heavy mulch layers encourage tree roots to grow up into the mulch material, which may dry out during long, dry periods, causing roots to die.

Some concern has been expressed about mulch attracting unwanted pests into the home. Termites can infest wood mulches, so never place mulch in direct contact with any wood surface on the home. Inspect mulch beds regularly if they are part of a foundation planting, especially in areas where termites are known to be a problem. If termites are detected, contact a professional pest control operator and have the structure inspected. Mulch beds more than six feet away from the home will not cause a problem.

Trees and shrubs should be pruned at planting time only to remove branches damaged during handling and transplanting. The main leader on single-stemmed trees shouldn't be pruned unless they have been damaged. Lower branches shouldn't be removed because they manufacture critically needed food. All transplanted trees should be inspected during the first fall and winter after planting and pruned to remove any dead or crossing branches or to improve tree structure.

Water is critical to the success of any tree or shrub. Tree roots, especially the small, water-absorbing roots, are easily damaged during transplanting. For sufficient water uptake to occur, the root ball of a newly planted tree must be kept moist, but not saturated. Monitor the moisture in the root ball daily, and water as needed so it doesn't dry out. The area outside the root ball also should be watered to encourage root growth into surrounding soil. Avoid overwatering, which is a major cause of tree failure in many Nebraska communities.

SOURCE: David P. Mooter, Nebraska Forest Service.