

# 'Tis the season to plant trees

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**F**all and winter are the best seasons to plant trees; warm soil can foster new root growth while dormancy reduces water demand.

Most trees are available in containers, referred to by size in gallons. Three gallon trees are very young and easy to transport and establish; 30 gallon trees may be the limit for your trunk or torso to handle safely.

Choosing the right tree species and site are important first steps.

Look up to observe any powerlines or roof overhangs that might dictate a shorter mature height. Look down to notice the soil type – well drained or moist – and available root space constrained by any nearby hardscape – sidewalk, street or driveway. Look around to observe proximity to buildings – tree roots taper as they extend from the base, so keeping a tree 15' or more away from a foundation is a good plan.

The NCSU Extension Plant Toolbox is a good place for tree species information: <https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/>. A live oak would not be an appropriate tree to plant in a 30' x 30' lot; a redbud might be just right.

When you have selected the tree and proper site, it's time to measure and dig the hole.

The hole should be two to three times as wide as the diameter of the container, but never any deeper than the measurement from the root flare at the base of the tree to the bottom of the root ball. If there is any above the root flare in the pot, this should be removed.

Remove the plant from the container and cut any roots starting to grow in a circle. Be a bit aggressive; new root

shoots will emerge where cut and prevent the root girdling commonly a problem with containerized trees. The bottom of the root ball is probably flat; your hole should be flat on the bottom too. Backfill with the removed native soil and water or tamp down in several stages to secure the tree in its new home.

If you need to stabilize the tree for a windy location, a root ball bracing method is best. By firmly tacking the rootball in place, the tree trunk is able to develop a strength for wind resistance by allowing natural movement. Drive two 3' x 2x2 stakes on either side of the root ball until firm and attach an appropriate length of 2x2 board with drywall screws. Hammer downward on the stakes for complete soil contact with the horizontal boards, then use a reciprocating saw to cut the stakes flush with the horizontal boards. This safe, aesthetic, low-cost method can be viewed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yRXtKqj1Pdc>. It will fully decompose by the time the tree has rooted in, alleviating the risk of tree strap strangulation.

Use any extra soil to create a berm at the outside of the planting hole on the downhill side to help capture rainwater flow or as a donut ring if you plan to water the tree by hand. A light cover of mulch over is fine, but never let mulch touch the trunk of the tree. The base of the tree should always have a visible flare.

If you agree with the idea of leaving a living legacy in the form of a tree but are not able to plant one yourself, consider participating in the Alliance for Cape Fear Tree's "Trees Forever" program: <https://www.allianceforcapefearthrees.com/trees-forever-program>. If you prefer to donate time and help planting trees, the Alliance



**Now is a good time to plant trees, and rootball bracing is the best way to stabilize a new tree.**

[CONTRIBUTED PHOTO]

has volunteer opportunities posted for January and February. Your part in planting trees is a legacy we all can enjoy!

*The Arboretum is free and open every day from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Lloyd Singleton is director of the N.C. Cooperative Extension Center*

*for New Hanover County, located at the Arboretum, 6206 Oleander Drive. Reach him at [lsingleton@nhcgov.com](mailto:lsingleton@nhcgov.com) or 910-798-7660.*