

Virginia Gardening

with Jim May

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There is still plenty of time to plant shrubs and trees this fall

Few states are as diverse as Virginia in topography and climate. From sea level to mountains of over 5,000 feet, we run the gamut of elevation, soil types, rainfall amounts and temperatures. And like several other coastal states, Virginia contains a wide range of hardiness zones, from a cold Zone 5 in the mountains of the western part of the state to Zone 8 in the beach areas.

These varied conditions make selection of plant materials critical. Be sure when you buy plants they are suitable for your area of the state, in their tolerance to both cold and to heat. Read labels and ask questions. This is particularly important with woodies, those trees, shrubs, or perennials that maintain a woody stem or trunk year-round, as opposed to an herbaceous perennial with a green stem that dies down each fall.

Whether you are planning to buy new woodies and plant them in your landscape or dig up and move some existing ones, fall is an excellent time to do it. Many garden centers are having fall sales and the weather is perfect for getting out there and digging in the soil. In most parts of the state, we typically can plant trees into December. As long as the soil temperature is above 40 degrees, roots will continue to grow. Your new investment will have this fall and next spring to get established before having to face a hot summer.

Before planting, check for overhead obstructions such as utility lines and don't forget to call the utility company before you dig if underground utilities are in your neighborhood.

When shopping for plants, think about the mature size of the plant before you buy. This is so critical and so many times overlooked. That cute little tree isn't going to stay that size forever. There are plenty of trees that grow less than 30 feet tall and many that have a pyramidal or columnar shape that doesn't spread out very wide, making them more suitable for smaller spaces.

Trees are the anchors of any landscape and selection of them should be your first priority. The type of trees depends on the desired effect and the purpose they will satisfy in the landscape. Will they attract birds to the yard? Shade your patio or deck? Screen an unsightly view? Trees should provide contrast and relief from surrounding buildings and create seasonal interest in areas near your home.

Deciduous trees can provide shade to the southwest side of the house in the summer, reducing cooling costs by 15 to 20 percent. In the winter, after the leaves are gone, they let the sunshine in. Evergreens can provide protection from the wind in the winter and screen out unwanted sights or sounds year-round. Trees with interesting shapes, bark or berries can provide winter interest and food for the birds.

You may even have some shrubs or a small tree in your yard that needs to be moved for whatever reason. Now is a great time to do it. If moving a shrub, tie back any side branches in the way and dig the largest root ball you can handle. It's best to have some help if the plant is large; they can get pretty heavy. Dig all around the plant and gently pry it out of the hole. Lean it to one side and get a piece of burlap or a tarp under it. Now lean it the other way and pull the tarp under. Drag or carry it to its new location.

The new planting hole should be shallow and broad. Make the hole at least three times as wide as the root ball, but no deeper. Remember that roots grow mostly out, not down.

If planting a tree, identify the trunk flare. The trunk flare is where the roots start to spread at the base of a tree. When you plant a tree, the trunk flare must be visible aboveground. The most common cause of death of newly planted trees and shrubs is planting too deep.

Set the plant in the hole and start backfilling. Fill the hole one-third full and gently but firmly pack the soil around the base of the root ball. Water generously. Continue to backfill and water. Apply a two-to-four inch layer of organic mulch. This is a critical step and should not be overlooked.

Water is also critical! A newly planted shrub or tree should be watered daily for the first week, twice weekly for one to two months, then weekly until established, or at least a full year.

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