



There's more to the fall season than pumpkins and mums

Now that it's officially fall, many homeowners are decorating the landscape with pumpkins, mums and even some Halloween decorations. And, even though we'll still experience some summer-like temperatures, the fall season is a good time to get new trees and shrubs in the ground.

Temperatures are starting to cool off which leads to less plant stress. The root systems of trees and shrubs will also have a chance to grow and become established before winter hits if gardeners get them in the ground fairly soon. And because roots will grow in the soil as long as soil temperatures are above 40 degrees F, roots will continue to grow well into the winter months providing a larger, well-established root system compared to plants installed in the spring. This gives plants a better chance of survival when the heat hits next summer.

Proper handling before planting is necessary to avoid damage or stress to the plant and help ensure the growth of a long-lasting, healthy tree or shrub. Once purchased, keep the root ball moist and handle the plant by the container, not the trunk or stems, until ready to plant.

Once the location in the landscape has been determined, dig a hole two or three times the diameter of the plant's root ball, making sure it's no deeper than the root ball itself. Gardeners dealing with clay soil should plant trees or shrubs with the top of the root ball 1 to 3 inches above the grade. If the soil is sandy, plant at the original grade. Something else to note ... don't apply any amendments to the backfill. Also, while it's tempting, don't put any gravel or crushed stone in the bottom of the hole.

When the plant is in the hole, fill it with the removed soil. Don't add any amendments to the soil as they are unnecessary and can result in complications such as root rot.

Because newly planted young trees and shrubs have limited capacity for using fertilizer until it has become established, fertilizing isn't recommended at the time of planting unless a soil test has been conducted and has indicated nutrient deficiencies. New plants should be watered well at planting and during establishment. Rainfall in Oklahoma typically isn't adequate to provide the needed moisture.

How much moisture does a new plant need? They need the equivalent of 1 inch of rain per week. If we're experiencing a windy and warm fall season, gardeners may need to water two or three times per week. If you notice signs of wilting, the plant needs water. Apply water slowly at the base of the plant but be careful not to overwater or the amount of oxygen in the soil will be lowered and can damage the roots.

It's OK to add 1 to 3 inches of mulch but be sure to keep it at least 2 to 4 inches away from the base of the plant. The mulch will help stop weed and turf growth, reduce plant competition for water and nutrients and regulate soil temperature and moisture.

There's no need to prune new trees or shrubs at this time as it can inhibit plant growth. Remove only injured or diseased branches.

Top-heavy trees or those planted in windswept areas may need to be staked but be careful not to stake too rigidly. Allow for some sway. Tight or prolonged staking can result in an overall weaker tree that is more subject to girdling.