

Killing Trees with Kindness

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It is spring and soon our thoughts will be drawn to working in the landscape. There are many practices that have been passed on from landscape to landscape that are unknowingly harmful to the trees we are trying to take care of. Here is a list of my top five ways to kill a tree with kindness.



Overmulch: While a two to three inch layer of mulch is a good thing that helps to keep weeds away and adds organic matter to the soil as it breaks down, more than that can be harmful to a tree. This is especially true when the mulch is piled against the

trunk. We call this a “mulch volcano”. Too much mulch can actually keep water and oxygen from reaching the rootball and causing root death and the tree to become stressed. To keep mulch from getting too thick when we are freshening it up, rake some of the old mulch away and put it in your compost pile before you add a thin layer of new mulch. Also, keep the mulch a few inches away from the tree trunk.

Planting the same depth that it was growing in the container: We have heard this for many years and it sounds reasonable so why is it so bad? There are two reasons. First, as the tree is stepped up to larger and larger containers in the nursery, soil may be added on top of the root flare. Second, as the planting medium decomposes, the tree will naturally settle in the planting hole. The solution is to remove any soil that has been placed on top of the root flare, and plant the tree so that the root flare is at, or slightly above the soil surface.

Watering the new tree with the irrigation system: A newly planted tree needs quite a bit of irrigation in order for it to become established in the landscape. Most sprinkler systems do not deliver the proper amount of water to the correct location. The exception to the rule may be micro-irrigation where the tree has its own emitter. The proper amount of water for a two inch caliper tree is 4-6 gallons of water every day for a month, every other day for three months, and then weekly until it is established.

Pruning the water sprouts and interior branches from a tree so that the wind “blows through it”:

I have heard this for years and as a matter of fact, I recommended it as a young forester. Well, I have seen the error of my ways. By pruning trees this way, we are actually making the trees more susceptible to wind damage. The term for this is called “lions-tailing”. If we want to make trees more wind tolerant, we should be shortening the length of long branches by using a type of pruning called a reduction cut, and promoting a single stemmed leader.



Slicing rootballs to correct circling roots: I even saw this on a reputable gardening T.V. show last night. The rootball was a little rootbound so the solution was to make four vertical slices through the rootball to correct the problem. While this does not harm the tree it does not fix the problem either. Research has shown that shaving the outer inch off of the rootball will actually help the tree. When shaving the outer inch, roots are cut at the point just before they turn downward, the cut roots will sprout straight out from the trunk. This should make the tree more stable.

Hurricane Pruning Palm Trees: OK I know I said my top five, but I had room and this is a really good one. Recent research has shown that performing “hurricane cuts” on palms actually makes them more wind susceptible by causing the trunks to become constricted. This makes it more likely to snap off in high wind. Also, the Sabal Palm is one of the top hurricane resistant trees so it begs the question: why does a hurricane resistant tree need hurricane pruning?

