

# Phelan Gardens Tree & Shrub After-Planting Care Guide

*Congratulations on your new plant!* This guide was designed to ease your plant's transition from our nursery to your landscape. Proper care post-transplant can be the difference between a plant that serves your landscape for many years to come and one that fails to thrive. For planting instructions, please see our document, "Phelan Gardens Tree & Shrub Planting Guide."

**Water** is by far the most important input--and most prevalent threat--to your new plant. Under-irrigation can cause slow establishment, canopy dieback, and bark splits. How much (volume) and how often (frequency) you water will depend on many factors, including soil type, weather, exposure to sun and wind, and even things like reflected heat and light from adjacent structures, walls, or fences. Water may be applied any number of ways, such as hand watering with a hose or wand/sprayer, soaker hose, or by automated irrigation including drip or overhead spray systems. Dialing in your moisture level is the most essential task for a gardener in any climate, but is even more crucial in our dry and unforgiving Colorado landscape.

**Check the soil daily with your finger** for at least the first two weeks after planting. It should feel moist, but not soggy, like a wrung-out sponge. Make sure to check both the root ball as well as the immediately surrounding soil; it is not uncommon for the backfill to be beautifully moist and the rootball to be very dry. The root ball of freshly planted trees and shrubs can dry out in a single day.

Watering during the establishment period will be low volume and high frequency. That is, you may have to water your tree or shrub daily, and the amount of water you apply may only be a gallon or two. **Always check for soil moisture before watering!** Applying a larger amount of water will not reduce the need for regular watering. Amending the soil with compost will not significantly reduce its irrigation needs. Soil should never be amended to more than a 1:4 ratio of compost:native soil. **Wilting** is a sure sign of water problems and can be caused by under- or over-irrigation. Plants that are under-watered will spring back within a couple hours of watering; over-watered plants will stay down after watering. If your plant is wilted but still wet at the roots, do not water.

As your tree or shrub establishes, you will shift from high frequency, low volume watering, to low frequency, high volume watering. Trees will typically take one growing season per inch of trunk diameter to establish. That is, a tree with 2" caliper will take roughly 2 growing seasons to establish. A tree that is planted with improper technique and/or planted in very poor soil may take many years to establish, if it ever establishes at all.

**Mulching** is one of the very best things to do for your establishing plant. Some great types of mulch include wood chips, shredded bark, leaves, and pine needles. Mulch should generally be applied to a depth of 3-4", in a 3' radius around the plant. Mulch should never contact the bark. There should be a 6" radius around the trunk that is totally free of mulch to avoid soggy bark and let the roots breathe.

Remember to **winter water** about once every three weeks in the months between October and April when temperatures are above 40°F and the ground isn't frozen, regardless of recent snowfall. Dry roots are a leading cause of desiccation and winter death. Try to time your watering on a warm day immediately before a cold snap, so the water will insulate your plant's roots. Make sure to **wrap** your tree from the month of September through April to prevent sunscald. If **deer** present a threat to your tree, caging is recommended.

Expect limited canopy growth during the establishment period of your tree while your plant focuses on growing its roots. **Do not fertilize fresh transplants.** Your plant comes from the nursery with all the nutrition it needs for the first two years already stored away. **Pruning** should not be done in the first growing season except to correct major structural flaws or to remove broken branches/twigs.

Finally, remember to **enjoy** your new plant with careful observation. If you have any questions or concerns, please give us a call at **(719) 574-8058**.

## Further Reading from Colorado State University Extension Service's Colorado Master Gardener:

Garden Notes #635: Care of Recently Planted Trees: <https://cmg.extension.colostate.edu/Gardennotes/635.pdf>

Fact Sheet #7.214: Mulches for Home Grounds: <https://extension.colostate.edu/docs/pubs/garden/07214.pdf>

Fact Sheet #7.211: Fall and Winter Watering:

<https://extension.colostate.edu/topic-areas/yard-garden/fall-and-winter-watering-7-211/>

