Successful Tree Growing

Anyone who selects new trees for a landscape desires "rapid growth" from their new plantings. And just because rapid growth is desired, it does not always mean one must choose species that are so-called fast growers (which are often also brittle and short lived).

Newly planted trees that display slow growth can many times be traced back to either improper planting or improper maintenance. In many cases increased growth rates can be attained by making changes in both planting practices and maintenance practices. Increased growth rates can be accomplished in species considered to be slow growing (including hard maples, oaks, and other such species).

The following are some of the most important areas that can affect your new tree plantings growth rate. Every area listed can be an important factor by itself in affecting growth rate.

Planting depth

- Planting trees too deeply is a common practice that results in stagnated growth and sometimes death of the tree. A tree should be planted no deeper than it was when growing in the field or in the container. An inch of soil over the root ball on a B&B tree is about right. If the soil is a heavy clay or is compacted, the tree should be planted 3 to 5 inches above the soil level (grade). One can then berm the tree with a lighter soil mix or mulch (cypress mulch is recommended).

Mulching

- Mulch consisting of cypress, bark, wood chips or other organic materials will conserve moisture and reduce soil temperature extremes when placed around the base of a plant. When used correctly mulch also helps prevent grass and weed growth and can prevent soil erosion. All of which result in the improved growth and health of a tree. Mulch should consist of coarse materials. Sawdust, grass clippings and any other fine organic matter should be avoided.

Irrigation

- Do not allow your tree(s) to become stressed by either too much moisture (over watering) or too little (under watering). Both are equally bad for the health of your tree(s). Rarely do we receive enough moisture throughout the entire growing season to adequately water trees during their establishment period (usually 4 to 5 years). As a general rule you can plan to irrigate your tree(s) approximately every 7 to 10 days during the growing season (during periods when adequate rainfall does not occur). Irrigation should be done slowly so as to allow the water to absorb into the soil. A slow flowing hose running for approximately 20 minutes is a good rule of thumb to follow. Also berming your mulch will aid in retaining water which will allow it to soak into the ground instead of running off.

Retention of branches

- During the establishment period low limbs should not be removed. These limbs should be retained for several years after the initial planting of the tree. They will aid in increasing the trunk taper, growth rate and act as a deterrent in preventing injures to the trunk from lawn mowers. After several years a few can be gradually removed each year until the desired look and shape are achieved. Water sprouts or suckers should be removed as soon as they are noticed.

Prevent truck injury

- Power lawn movers and line trimmers are one of, if not the biggest, cause of killing young trees. Young bark is very easily bruised or killed which results in stress of the tree. The result of a young tree becoming stressed is reduced growth rate. Often stress is followed by borers or diseases which further weaken the tree and many times results in death. ***Keep trimmers and mowers away from your tree's trunk.***

Control weeds and grass

- It is best to maintain a 3 to 4 foot diameter, vegetation free circle around the trunk of your tree. This is a good practice to follow for the life of the tree and can be accomplished in a number of ways.

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By using a contact herbicide, by using mulches or with a combination of both methods. Young trees do not do well in competition with grasses and weeds for nutrients and moisture. If grasses and weeds are not controlled around the base of the tree, its growth rate will be reduced.

Fertilization

- Beyond the first growing season (after planting) a young trees growth can be stimulated by fertilizer, especially a fertilizer high in nitrogen. Low analysis or slow release granular or liquid fertilizers work very well. Except for the first year, plan to fertilize throughout the trees establishment period as a minimum requirement. After the trees establishment period (4 to 5 years) it should be considered to continue the fertilization practice. Your tree will respond to fertilization well beyond the establishment period.
- ***Please remember that fertilization should be avoided the first growing season after planting as it is easy to burn roots on newly planted trees.***