

Some general notes on planting deciduous trees.

Pre-planting preparation

Any perennial weeds such as kikuyu, couch blackberry etc should be dealt with in the summer before planting.

It is beneficial to rip the site in the autumn. A tractor with a rabbit ripper penetrating 50cm will break through the hardpan which commonly exists some 20cm down - -- especially if the site has had a history of grazing or cropping. This is best done once there is moisture in the soil and it fractures along natural cleavage lines. If the soil gets too wet the ripper will merely cut a slit smearing over and blocking off soil pores.

A cultivation over the riplines will further assist root penetration and reduce the weed burden if done after the first germination.

Digging the planting holes

If the site has been ripped then the holes will only need to be large enough to accommodate the rootball and can be easily dug down the side of the rip with a spade.

If the site has not been ripped then it is advisable to dig a larger hole to help the roots make a start.

Post hole diggers are a risky tree planting tool because they tend to glaze (polish) the sides of the hole restricting root penetration. They should only be used as a pilot and the hole expanded by spade.

Planting

Planting is best done in late winter/early spring once the trees have been fully dormant and are thinking about starting to move again.

It is helpful to wet the roots before before planting (Do not of course allow the bared roots to dry out at any stage.)

The trees should be set in the ground no deeper than they were growing in the nursery and the soil types (eg top soil, sub-soil etc) returned back into the hole in the order in which they came out.

It is important that the roots are in reasonably contact with the soil with no large air pockets.

Particularly large clods should be broken up and it may be helpful to shake the tree a little as you are backfilling. It is hard to generalise and cover all soil types; the above should be done without completely pulverising the soil and destroying all of the structure.

Firm the soil around the stem by treading around it with your feet.

It is important not to add manure, compost etc into the hole as these can create localised waterlogging as they absorb water creating anaerobic conditions which favour root destroying organisms. Such amendments can be very useful but as a mulch on top of the soil (see later).

If you are planning to water the tree by bucket it is helpful to form a saucer with a ring of soil about a metre in diameter. This will hold the water till it soaks in and is usually much easier to form in the winter but you may have to leave a plug hole on the downhill side to fill later so that the bowl doesn't fill with winter rains..

Weeds Weeds are a big enemy on young trees and an area of at least 1 metre diameter should be kept free of weed competition.

Fertiliser Generally the tree will not be able to make use of fertiliser until its roots start to become active so delaying until 2- 6 weeks after planting is recommended.

The application of 30gms (a small handful) of a general horticultural fertiliser (but with Nitrogen content of 3-10% only - too much nitrogen will inhibit root development) sprinkled over the surface will be adequate at this stage.

An alternative is a layer of dry well rotted manure which also acts as a mulch.

Mulching

Mulching with organic materials or even stones or woodchips can be helpful in reducing the need for extra watering and for maintaining a moist active soil zone above the roots – it is better than putting the organic material directly into the hole.

There are however some points to watch:

- applying mulch in the winter will insulate the soil from the warmth of the sun and delay soil activity and tree growth. Better to apply in late spring.
- avoid the mulch/manure from making direct contact with the stem as this can cause to rot.
- pale coloured mulches such as hay or straw will reflect sunlight which can create sunburn on the young stem.
- sawdust, woodchips and other woody matter will create ongoing competition with the tree for nitrogen as they break down.
- stones may later need to be moved from the stem so that they restrict its growth or become engulfed.

Watering

Water is the secret to rapid growth and will make a big difference to the growth of your trees if applied for the first summer or two.

It is best to start watering early – when paddocks start to dry off in the spring - so that the trees do not get any check on their growth. Don't wait till Christmas to give them a present – they may go into a sulk from which it may be difficult to get them to escape.

Watering is more important in the early part of the growing season than later.

It is better water deeply at weekly or fortnightly intervals than to spread that same amount over shallow daily waterings.

Trickle irrigation is ideal for growing trees. It may take a little time to set up but will save time over the summer and so makes it more likely that the trees will get the water they need.

Yellowing and loss of leaves during the spring/summer growing season (getting “autumn colour” early) is an indicator of insufficient water.