



Handling & Planting Container-Grown Trees

While many experienced landscape professionals prefer field-grown balled and burlapped trees for landscape plantings, the nursery industry is producing greater numbers of container-grown trees each year. This is because container-grown plants are popular with the consumer. There are many reasons why:

- A tree grown in a container will suffer little, if any, transplant shock when removed from the container and planted properly. Thus, a high degree of transplanting success can be expected.
- A container-grown tree can be planted throughout the year when the soil and weather conditions permit.
- Container-grown trees are grown in a lightweight medium and are easy to ship and handle by the nursery grower and the consumer.

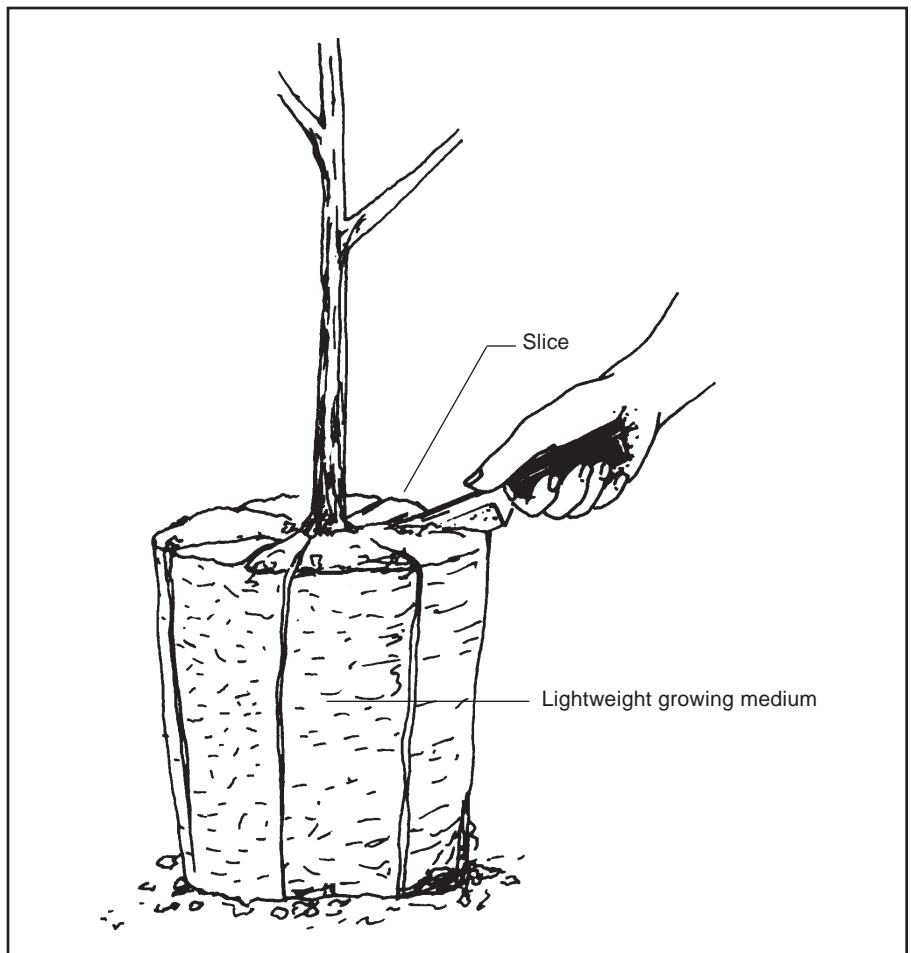
On the down side, there are two serious problems with container-grown trees. Both can be overcome by a knowledgeable consumer.

Container-grown trees are often root bound. They grow more rapidly than shrubs, ground covers, and flowers, which are also grown in containers, making it difficult for the nursery grower to keep up with necessary repotting into larger containers. If a tree is not sold quickly and is held over, it will

become root-bound in its final container. A root-bound plant will often girdle itself with circling, deformed roots and may stagnate or die.

To lessen this problem, remove the root ball from the container and

slice through it with a sharp knife from top to bottom in four to eight locations. This will sever any circling roots allowing them to grow outward. Plant the tree immediately following this procedure. If you find the tree is severely



Slice deeply into the root ball from top to bottom in several locations to sever circling roots on the surface and in the interior.

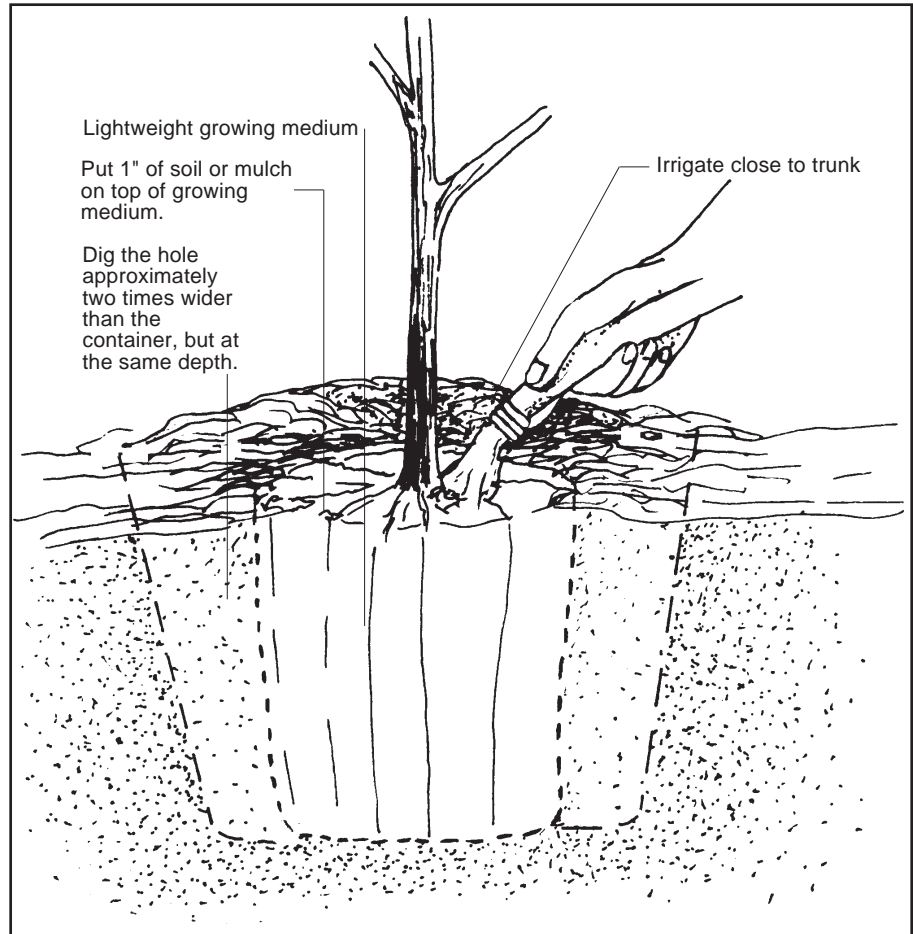
root bound with large circling roots, you may want to consider returning it to the nursery for a replacement.

The second problem involves a soil interface situation. The root ball potting medium in the container will differ greatly from the soil that surrounds that medium once the tree is planted.

Generally, the surrounding soil will hold moisture better than the potting medium. In fact, the soil outside the root ball can be wet while the root ball potting medium is dry to the point that the tree is wilted or dying. Be sure to water the root ball and check it and the surrounding soil for dryness. In hot, dry summer weather it may be necessary to check the root ball for dryness every 2 to 4 days. You should expect to irrigate the root ball more frequently than the surrounding soil during the first growing season following planting.

Plant the tree so the root collar is even with the surrounding soil. This may not be the same depth as the tree was growing in the container. Frequently container grown trees are planted too deep or soil is added after the tree is placed in the container. It is important to cover the root ball surface slightly with soil or mulch to prevent moisture “wicking” from the light soil medium. However, avoid planting the tree too deep. Planting as little as 2 or 3 inches deeper than the tree was growing in the container may result in stagnation or death.

Always remove the container from your plant, even if it is composed of paper or peat. Large 3 to 5 gallon metal cans will need to be cut, while smaller 1 or 2 gallon cans may be



Because lightweight growing medium will dry out before surrounding soil, it is important to check the root ball for dryness to determine when watering is necessary.

removed by turning the plant upside down then tapping the rim.

A high degree of success can be expected in growing good landscape trees from container-grown stock if these suggestions are followed.

Related Publications

- *Staking and Guying Landscape Trees* — MF-1120
- *Selecting and Planting a Tree* — L-870
- *Fertilizing Trees and Shrubs* — L-707

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