THE TREE COUNCIL

Tips on caring for young trees

The Tree Council urges everyone who has planted trees in the last five years to revisit them at least once a year and give them the care that will help them to survive. It's a key part of its campaign to get better care for all trees, of all ages.

Thousands of young trees, planted with care and expense, die from the lack of just a little aftercare. So time, money and effort are wasted. Here are a few tips to help many more trees survive the crucial early years.

These easy, effective tasks normally require less than five minutes for each young tree, ideally every March or April.

Tending

Check the tree in March or April every year.

- Is it alive? If there are no leaves, look for green under the bark of twigs (scrape the surface with a fingernail or knife) and living buds.

  Fill in any gaps in the soil around the roots and use a foot to firm the new soil. Also, if the soil has been lifted by frost, firm it down.

  If the soil is waterlogged, channel/drain the excess water away from the tree.

  Look for damage caused by pests and diseases.

- If the tree is dead, try to work out why and correct the problem (seeking advice if necessary) before planting a new one.

Guards

Tree guards are intended to stop animals – such as mice, rabbits, deer or horses – damaging young trees by eating the shoots and leaves or stripping the bark.

Check the guards in spring and autumn to ensure they are effective (no bark missing or twigs bitten or broken off) and not rubbing or cutting into the tree.

- If a guard is inadequate or the risk has changed, consider different protection, e.g. a taller tube to protect against deer, or fencing to keep off cows and other farm animals.

- Repair/replace damaged guards.
- If a guard is damaging the tree, adjust, modify or replace it.
- Remove the guard when there is no longer a risk of damage and clear away any material that has built up inside.

Pruning

Careful pruning can prevent problems in later life. If a tree has two competing upright shoots, remove one at an early stage to leave a single main shoot. This can save the tree from possible future branch failure.

Loosening

Check the stake and the tie. Is the tie too tight? The tree stem should not be under pressure from the tie, and should not rub against the stake or guard.
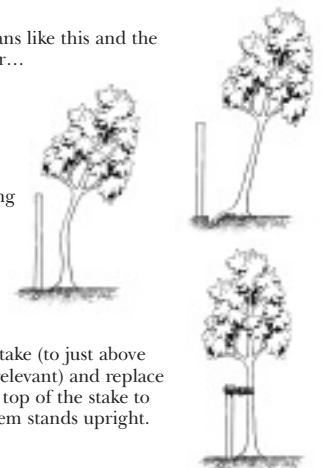
Does the tree still need a stake? A young tree should only need one until its roots have grown into undisturbed soil to give it stability, which generally takes a year. Check this in spring by releasing the tie and if the tree stays upright, remove the stake.

If the tree leans like this and the roots move or…

… if it is top heavy, bending over like this

shorten the stake (to just above the bend, if relevant) and replace the tie at the top of the stake to ensure the stem stands upright.

Clearing

Pull up any grass and weeds for a radius of at least half a metre around the tree. Take care to avoid damage to the tree's roots.

Early in the year, when the soil is moist, cover the cleared area with a mulch mat, bark or brushwood chippings, or old piece of carpet. This helps retain moisture near the roots, reduces competition from weeds, and means there is no need to use grass-cutting machinery near the tree where it might damage the bark.

These tips have been prepared with help from the Tree Advice Trust, a member of The Tree Council.

Illustrations © David Higham.

Trees Matter – Make The Most of Them