

Water Conscious Landscaping for the Cow Creek GCD

Part 5 - Planting and Maintenance

Planting

Trees and Shrubs - The first step to long-term success with a Kendall County landscape is proper planting. Dig the hole only slightly larger than the root ball of the plant and never deeper. If the hole is dug deeper and then backfilled, the plant will sink over time, leading to many problems. Dig a square or angular hole. This encourages the roots to grow into surrounding soil rather than circle as they often do in a round hole. Fill the hole with water and be sure it drains within a few hours. If drainage is poor, it is best to berm up the soil or create a raised bed.

Carefully remove the plant from its container. If it is heavily rooted or circling roots are noticed, use shears or a strong knife to make a vertical cut about one-half inch into the root ball. Failure to do this may lead to girdling roots, which will ultimately kill the plant. Set the plant gently into the hole making sure that the root flare is at or slightly above ground level. Note that plants sometimes come from the nursery planted too deeply in the pot. Backfill the hole with native soil. Apply 2 - 4" of a good mulch over the root ball, but away from the trunk and water thoroughly.

Mycorrhizal fungi are beneficial organisms which colonize the roots of most plants and help them take up and use water and nutrients more efficiently, making them much more drought resistant. It is a good idea to treat the roots of trees and shrubs with a product containing the appropriate mycorrhizae.

Grass - Grass sod must be planted immediately. Remaining stacked on the pallet reduces its health tremendously. If there is any delay in planting, spread the grass out one layer deep even if it means placing it on the sidewalk or driveway. Never put compost under new grass. This greatly slows root development. Immediately after planting roll the grass with a heavy roller to press the roots firmly to the ground and remove air pockets. If desired, organic fertilizer and/or a thin layer of compost can then be applied. Regular watering will be needed for the first few days to encourage rooting.

Maintenance

Watering - Water should be applied directly to the soil (drip irrigation) or with a sprinkler that produces large drops and keeps them low to the ground. It is best to water early in the day. It is wasteful (and illegal) to use a sprinkler mid-day. Automatic systems should be equipped with a rain sensor to avoid water waste in times of adequate rainfall. It is far better to water thoroughly than to make several light applications of water. On average, 1 - 2" of water should be applied at a time. Grass needs watering when you can see your footprints after walking across it. Shrubs and trees should be watered when the soil at the base of the plant is dry 2 - 3" deep.

Mowing - Always be sure mower blades are sharp to reduce tearing and damage to grass blades. Depending on variety, grass should be mowed to a height of 2 - 4". Mowing at this height reduces water use by turf grasses. Extremely dense grasses (Tiff bermuda and some zoysia varieties) may require a reel type mower rather than the standard rotary type. Always leave clippings on the lawn as this returns needed minerals and nutrients to the soil. With a proper fertilizing program, it does NOT

create thatch.

Weed Control - Proper mowing and fertilizing will create thick grass, which will choke out weeds. Weeds should be viewed as a symptom, not a problem. They may indicate soil compaction or nutrient problems. Correct these issues and the weeds will go away.

Broad leaf weed killers usually contain one or more chemicals which have been linked to cancer in pets. "Weed and feed" products usually contain atrazine, which has been linked to serious birth defects in humans. These products also pose a threat to our groundwater. **DO NOT USE THEM!**

Fertilizing - Most plants will benefit from periodic application of a good fertilizer. Organic products are best. They do not burn and do not have to be watered after application. They increase the organic content of soil, reducing compaction and increasing the ability of the soil to hold water. Chemical fertilizers do the opposite. Organic fertilizers also encourage beneficial soil life and reduce water use by your plants. They do not encourage the succulent growth favored by insect pests. They also don't pose a threat to our surface and groundwater supplies.

Compost and Mulch - The application of a thin layer of compost one or more times a year to turf areas has been shown to reduce water and fertilizer needs of turfgrass. Compost should be applied to grass during the cool season only, as summertime application may lead to yellowing. Compost can be spread by hand or blown on. Maintaining a 2 - 4" layer of mulch over the root zones of trees, shrubs, and perennials provides many benefits. It suppresses weed growth, conserves moisture, warms the soil in winter and cools it in the summer, and may reduce the fertilizer needs of plants.

Xeric plants benefit from a mineral mulch (lava or decayed granite) while others benefit most from an organic mulch. Free organic mulch is usually available from the county. It can be turned into "living" mulch (the best type) by the addition of a small amount of good quality compost.

Insect Problems - Most insects in the landscape are benign or even beneficial. Even damaging ones are usually a sign of a cultural problem or may simply signal the end of the growing season for annuals. If control is necessary, use only organic products and treat only problem areas. Even organic products may harm beneficial insects, which are nature's first line of defense against pests. Chemical pesticides pose a threat to our groundwater and may harm the health of your family and pets, **AVOID THEIR USE!**

Even some undesirable insects may have a beneficial function. Fire ants, for instance, are the largest destroyer of ticks which carry a number of serious diseases of animals and people. Eliminate them from your yard if you like, but leave them alone in undeveloped areas. Be sure you properly identify any suspected insect pest before beginning a treatment program, and always use the least toxic means of control.