

NORTHUMBERLAND

Northumberland County Council

Buying good quality trees

The planting of trees is important to the health, value and aesthetics of an area. It is an asset which will reap rewards in the long term, providing the right tree is planted in the right place and maintained in the right way.

What determines a good quality tree?

A good quality tree has:

- An adequate root ball. If possible, check the rootball to ensure that there are enough sound roots capable of supporting the tree.
- A stem which is free from mechanical wounds and those created by bad pruning
- A good form with evenly spaced side branches which are firmly attached to the stem.

A poor quality tree has:

- A small rootball with girdled or circled roots and those which have been torn or otherwise damaged.
- multiple stems, tight together with included bark and showing signs of mechanical damage and poor pruning.
- A poor form with branches unevenly spaced and crowded together in the canopy.

Any of the above problems, either individually or collectively can greatly reduce the tree's chances for a long, healthy life.

Before buying a tree it is worth considering the points described below to help you in your selection.

Root problems

Roots on trees for sale generally fall within three categories:

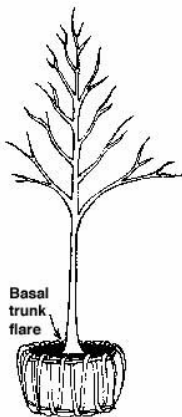
1. Bare roots – Usually small trees with no soil covering the roots.
2. Roots in the soil are held in place by a Hessian or other fabric, and occasionally in a wire basket.
3. Roots and soil in a container.

Bare rootstock

After being dug up the bare rooted tree should have roots which are not crushed or torn. Any damaged roots should be pruned to leave a clean cut. Any root pruning should be carried out prior to planting using a sharp pair of secateurs.

Root balled stock

You should be able to see the basal trunk flare. The flare is the spreading trunk base



just above the roots. Root balls should be flat on top. Root balls in round bags tend to have numerous major roots which have been damaged during the excavation and bagging process. Any damaged root should be pruned to leave a clean cut. The root ball should be at least ten times the diameter of the trunk, measured at least 15cm above the trunk flare.

Once the tree has arrived at its planting site, carefully peel away the root ball covering to see if any protruding roots have been crushed or damaged. If there are only a few damaged roots, the injured sections can be removed with a sharp tool. Be careful not to break the soil root ball.

If the root ball is intact, remove the wire cage, place the tree into the planting hole and fold down the Hessian covering. This will allow the roots to grow laterally into the new soil.

Container stock

Trees can be grown in a variety of containers from tubs, plastic bags or air pots. Prior to purchasing a tree, always check the roots to ensure they are not circled in the pot or have been damaged. Circled or damaged roots can affect



the growing potential of the tree. If only a few roots are circled or damaged, remove them using a sharp pair of secateurs.

You should always be able to see the trunk flare. It should not be buried beneath the soil.

Injuries

Always be wary of trees with trunk wraps. These wraps can hide wounds, poor pruning cuts and insect injuries. Remove the trunk wrapping to allow you to fully inspect the tree trunk prior to buying. If the tree is free from injury, the wrap can be replaced to protect the trunk during transit, but should be removed after planting.

Poor pruning

Poor pruning can cause major problems to a developing tree. The removal of the swollen area at the base of the tree can prevent the tree from successfully sealing the wound, leading to possible cankers, decay or cracks.

A correct pruning cut removes the branch just outside the branch collar. This correct pruning cut should leave a near circular shaped area of sound tissue. Flush cuts should be avoided as the trunk tissues above and below a flush cut often dies. In extremes of temperature, cracks or long dead streaks may develop above and below these dead areas.

Form

Good, strong, firmly attached branches evenly spaced along the trunk are an advantage to the developing tree. They look aesthetically pleasing and reduce the likelihood for the need to carry out any corrective pruning as the tree matures.

Occasionally branches are identified with weak attachments. These are unions where the branch and trunk are squeezed together. As this squeezing increases, as the tree grows, cracks can begin to form below the point of attachment. This can lead to branch failure during mild to moderate storms.

Where there are multiple branches growing from the same place on the trunk, the likelihood of weak attachments and cracks increases greatly. The same is true where there are multiple stems, squeezed together. As the tree grows and increases in diameter, the stems are forced apart, which can lead to the failure of one or more of the stems.

If you would like a tree with multiple stems, ensure they are adequately spaced at ground level.

Corrective pruning

If your tree has only a few minor problems, corrective pruning can help. Begin corrective pruning one year after planting and space the pruning over several years.

The planting of a tree is a long term investment, so it is worthwhile taking the time to choose a high quality tree. It may cost slightly more in the short term but will provide you with so many more benefits long term.

If you would like further information on the selection and buying of high quality trees you can contact Northumberland County Council on 01670 6006400 and ask to speak to your local Tree and Woodlands Officer.

Alternatively you can obtain further information from the International Society of Arboriculture at www.treesaregood.org