

Island Life for your Trees!

“...I'll be unwinding, down in the islands, down in the islands...” (“Island Song”, Zac Brown Band)
Ahhh...white sand, sunshine and an ocean breeze...

While we may dream of the perfect island life for ourselves, consider creating an island life for your trees!

Most landscape trees are planted as individual specimens, surrounded by lawn. Trees naturally grow in forests where there is a layer of organic mulch and undisturbed soil, rich with microbial and fungal life – not a thick mat of lawn with irrigated, compacted soils beneath the surface. To promote a healthier growing environment for your tree, use one or more trees as an anchor surrounded by companion plants in a mulched planting bed or landscape island. This is especially good for trees like birch and aspen.

Tips for planting under and around trees:

- Protect the tree in the process. Trees are sensitive to any damage to their roots and bark. Most tree roots grow within a few inches of the soil surface (almost all roots are in the top 12”-18” of soil), right where the oxygen levels and soil nutrients are best. Be careful about disturbing the root system. Use a small trowel or digging knife rather than a shovel and if you encounter a root, move on to another spot.
- The larger the island or planting bed, the more benefits it will provide. The tree will suffer fewer conflicts and inputs with lawn care: competition from turfgrass roots, effects of fertilizing and weed control, and deadly lawn mower and string trimmer damage.
- Do not add more soil around the tree – this is the equivalent of planting a tree too deeply. Instead, dig gently and plant small plants around the tree, in the existing soil. Unwanted existing vegetation can be removed by hand or a “tree-friendly” herbicide like glyphosate. Avoid using chemicals if possible.
- Select plants that are suitable for the amount of sunshine they will receive. If the tree is small, plant sun-loving, drought-tolerant plants. If the tree is large enough to produce full shade, choose shade-loving plants like hostas (there are dozens of types available!), hardy ferns, columbine, astilbe, and bleeding heart. Add color with annuals including coleus, begonias and impatiens. (See “Annual & Perennial Flowers for North Dakota”, NDSU Ext. H322, May 2016 – available online. Select plants based on sun/shade, attracting pollinators, color and fragrance)
- Add mulch to a depth of 3 to 4 inches, but keep the mulch away from the tree. Organic mulch like wood chips is best: it will decompose, adding even more nutrients to the soil; it helps retain moisture; it keeps the soil cool in hot weather and insulates the roots in winter. Any weeds that emerge are easily pulled from the mulch. This mulched area will aid in stormwater infiltration, too. Many trees show a dramatic increase in the rate of growth when properly mulched.
- There's no need to build a hard-scape border around the perimeter of the bed; let the mulch blend naturally where the turf begins.



Beth Hill, NDFS

Any area that is mulched reduces mowing – that's music to the ears of anyone who does not enjoy the task of frequent mowing. The diversity of species in the plantings will increase insect and wildlife biodiversity, improve soil health and will add dynamic beauty that increases property value. There you have it – multiple reasons to create an island oasis in your own backyard!

Note: Landscape islands are a good idea for public spaces, too – like parks, playgrounds and school yards.

The ND Forest Service offers a grant program for planting trees on public property.

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