

**A LITTLE BIT COUNTRY
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Transplanting Woody Plants – When?

When is the best time to transplant trees? There are many variables to consider when answering this question. There is one thing for sure. That is, regardless of the time, the process of transplanting adds stress to trees and most of the trees we transplant are not native to this area.

Some species may survive transplanting any time during the year when the ground is not frozen, but woody plants are preferably moved in the spring after the ground thaws and before the buds on the tree or shrub begin to swell. They may also be moved in the fall after leaf drop, but before the ground freezes. When transplanting in the fall, it should take place soon after leaf drop. This provides time for new water absorbing roots to develop before the soil freezes.

Evergreens such as spruce, pine and juniper must be handled with extreme care. They are especially prone to winter browning if planting is delayed until shortly before the ground freezes in the fall. Although I personally prefer spring transplant of these evergreens, I have seen successful fall transplants that were moved in the late summer or very early fall. When applied properly, anti-transpirants can help to reduce water loss from needles during our windy winter conditions.

An important key to successful fall transplants is good soil moisture and wind protection.

Trees and shrubs grown in nurseries are more likely to survive the transplant process than those grown in the wild or established plantings on a farm. In nurseries the trees are likely grown under special cultural practices to prepare them for eventual harvesting. One of the common nursery practices is root pruning. This concentrates root

development closer to the tree. Field-grown nursery plants may have 75% of their root system intact after they are dug, whereas trees and shrubs dug from the wild or natural landscape plantings may only have 25% or less of their root system intact.

Another important key to transplant success is to keep the exposed roots moist at all times. Dehydration of any part of the remaining root system causes damage to the root tissues and reduces water uptake following transplant.

Many years ago I witnessed good will efforts of a civic minded organization who desired to beautify a treasured building in the community. A local farmer agreed with the worthiness of the project and donated the needed 8 – 10 foot spruce trees. On one unusually warm May weekend, members of the organization took a small farm truck and backhoe and proceeded to dig two trees each trip to the farm. The trees were then transported approximately twenty miles. During this time a very large percentage of the remaining roots of those rather large trees were exposed to 90° temperature and wind caused by the truck traveling about 55 mph. Of the fourteen trees transplanted that weekend, only two showed life the following spring.

There is no one answer as to the best time of year to transplant a tree. I think a spring transplant is more forgiving, but any woody plants moved then need tender loving care.