

A Word From the Watershed: Tree Planting 101

By Corrie Aiuto

This month, the Upper Nehalem Watershed Council (UNWC) will host two volunteer tree planting events, on October 17 and 24, both Saturdays, from 10:00 am to 2:00 pm at Vernonia Lake. These events are an opportunity to get outside with friends and family, physically distanced, and do something valuable for the watershed. Planting a tree is something almost anyone can do, and in preparation for those events, the UNWC presents here the essentials of tree planting.

Trees in riparian areas (the banks and shores of rivers and streams) provide shade that cools the water, habitat and forage for wildlife, and can eventually fall into the stream, adding complexity as large woody debris, which promotes diverse aquatic life. Riparian shrubs and vegetation fix the soil in place, reducing soil erosion. Many streams are in need of riparian reforestation after years of human interaction with the land and planting trees is one of the most basic ways we can help.

Tree planting projects can range from only a dozen trees to thousands, and vary wildly in cost and difficulty. If you plan to start a riparian planting project of your own you would need to consider what types of plants are suitable for your project site, how to prepare the site ahead of time to reduce competition from any established invasive plants, and a plan to revisit the new plantings in future years to protect them until they are “free to grow.” For now, we will just focus on the most basic element of a good tree planting program: how to properly

put a tree in the ground.

Planting a tree can be done wrong. Roots can be crushed or surrounded by air pockets that dry out the roots. The trunk can rot if planted too deep or the root structure can be damaged if left exposed in a hole too shallow. But planting correctly doesn't have to be a daunting mystery. By following a few important steps and working with care you can successfully plant a tree. Assuming your planting sites are already cleared of grass and weeds, follow these steps:

1. Inspect your seedling. Seedlings can sustain a lot of damage during their journey from nursery to planting site, so choose trees that are alive, green, and healthy. Be sure the root structure is moist and healthy, without excessive breakage or compaction, and for bare root seedlings, gently encourage the

roots to fall naturally, without folds or wadding.

2. Find the “trunk flare” or the part of the tree that transitions from trunk to roots. Often you can see a soil line on the tree from its time in the nursery, which is a good indication of this transition point. When planting, keep the trunk above the soil and the roots below. This prevents rot and decay on the trunk and damage from exposed roots.

3. Dig the hole. Create a hole large enough to position the roots pointing down without bending or compacting them. For bare root seedlings this means you will have to hold the tree suspended in place to measure and again while you backfill. Preparing a hole of the right depth is important. Planting in too deep or too shallow a hole is a common cause of seedling demise. Remember the trunk flare and work to create a hole that is just

the right depth.

4. Take a moment to sift through your backfill dirt and remove any large debris that would create air pockets around the roots. Be sure your tree is standing upright. If planted at a slant or angle it is less likely to survive. As you backfill, take care to fill evenly to avoid air pockets, firm but gentle so as not to compact the soil too much, which crushes the roots.

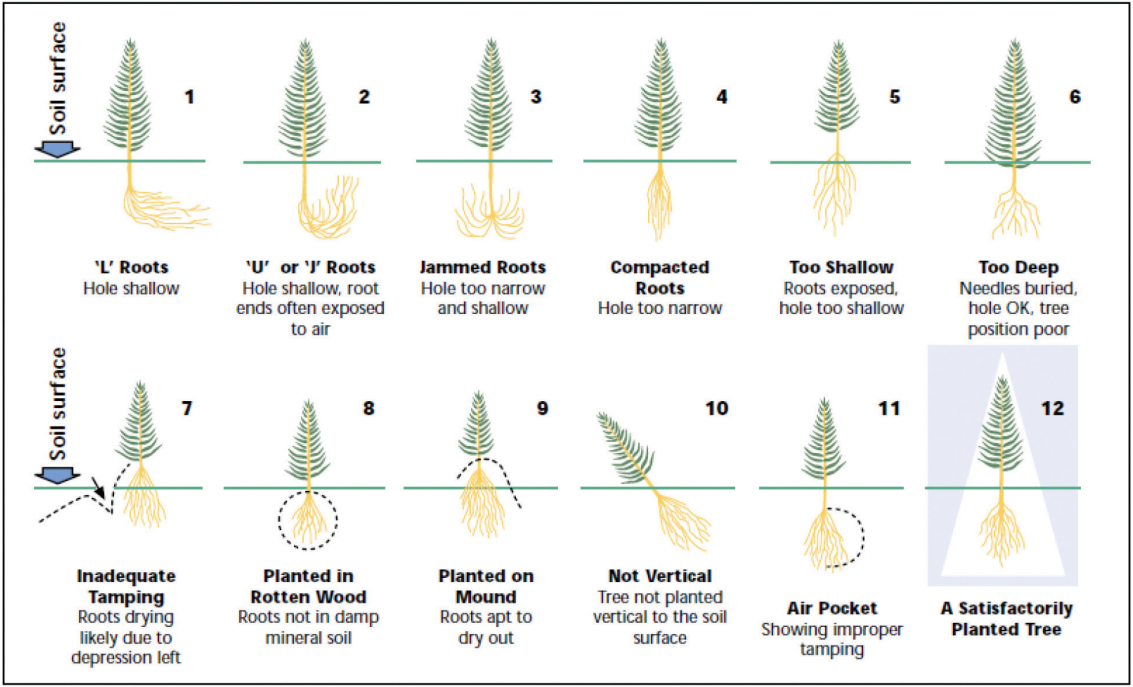
5. Once you see your tree is planted correctly, place any protective materials you may need. These include tree stakes, mesh or wire caging, or weed suppression mats and mulches.

Congratulations! You just planted a tree. This seedling will likely need additional care to protect it from animals or until it is big enough to escape competition from other plants, but it is off to a good start.

I hope after reading this you feel inspired to plant a tree, and if so, you come join us on Saturday, October 17 and Saturday, October 24 from 10 to 2 pm at Vernonia Lake to practice your skills. Bring boots, gloves, mask, water (and perhaps a snack) and the UNWC will bring trees and tools. Together we will help revitalize our riparian areas.

For questions or further details, contact the UNWC by calling (503) 396-2046, emailing maggie@nehalem.org or visiting unwc.nehalem.org.

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Source: Heavy, Justin & Volk, Timothy. (2013).
Planting Techniques for Living Snow Fences - Fact Sheet #6.

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