

Making Mulch Volcanoes? Stop It Already!

What is a mulch volcano? What is a 3 point pruning cut and why would you want to use one? Trunk flares? Branch collars? All great things to know about for proper tree planting, mulching, and pruning, according to Daniel Lewis, TX A&M Forest Service.

On a day perfect for demonstrating these techniques—cool and overcast—a small group of Circle D tree lovers gathered near the park playground to get the latest wisdom on tree care. Daniel did not disappoint.

First, was a short briefing on the major points and then it was time to show how it was done. The first demonstration was planting a Chinquapin Oak—one of the recommended native trees for this area that provides shade in the summer and some fall color before losing its leaves for winter. The site for this tree was selected to provide shade, as it grows, to a portion of the playground and a pavilion that bakes in the afternoon sun. Before removing the tree from its container, Daniel pointed out that it is often common for a tree to be planted too deep in its container—and in this case, the dirt in the container covered the root flare (the swelling section of where the trunk meets the roots) by about an inch. Attendees were shocked to see Daniel carve off the outer layer of roots after removing the tree from its container--all the better to make sure roots don't stay "root bound" but will be free to grow out from the root ball.



Then attendees were surprised to learn that it is best not to add amendments to the dirt, but just to fill the hole with the same dirt, being careful not to bury the root flare. Planting a tree too deep and piling mulch up around the trunk (mulch volcano) are two big no-no's that can eventually kill a tree at worst and cause it to not thrive at best. If the bottom of the tree where it goes into the ground is straight like a telephone pole, then probably your tree is buried too deep and it would benefit from removing some dirt to expose the root flare.

For pruning, Daniel instructed on how to do a 3 point pruning cut to remove the weight of somewhat large or very long branches before making the final pruning cut. He showed how to identify the place to prune on branches—just outside the branch collar (the swelling section of where the branch meets the trunk)—and to avoid pruning flush with the trunk which can damage the trunk tissue and invite disease. Daniel taught attendees to recognize the central leader and how to create one if there were co-dominant branches to improve structural strength.

Daniel packed in a lot of information in a short amount of time. Everyone went home with a list of 30 native trees for the East Central Texas Plains Region and handouts on planting, mulching, and pruning to reinforce their brief introduction to proper tree care. Daniel Lewis is happy to talk to you about your tree concerns and can be reached at (979) 968-5555 or dlewis@tfs.tamu.edu.

Tree Pruning and Planting Workshop

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Circle D Park

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