

Tree care tips for young trees (February 2020)

Jon Stokes, Director of Trees, Science and Research

If you planted whips (young trees) during [National Tree Week](#) in November, your trees are still in a delicate stage in their growth and winter can be a challenging time for them. A high proportion of trees that are planted may not survive without some TLC – follow these simple tree care tips to keep your trees in excellent health into spring and beyond.

1. **Is it alive?**

If there are no leaves, look for green under the bark of twigs (scrape the surface with a fingernail or knife) and living buds. Fill in any gaps in the soil around the roots and use a foot to pat firm the new soil. Also, firm soil around any plants that may have been lifted by frost. If the soil is waterlogged, channel/drain the excess away from the tree. Look for pests and diseases. Changing threats can result from changes in land use so look out for anything different or new.

2. **Keep trees well-watered**

Trees often need a little help keeping hydrated for their first few years of their lives. This can be even more important if you experience a frost.

3. **Thank you very mulch!**

Applying a 5-7 cm-thick layer of organic mulch around your trees (avoiding directly touching the trunk) serves a dual purpose, insulating the tree roots against extreme temperatures and keeping water in the soil.

4. **Check your guards!**

Tree guards are intended to stop animals —from mice and rabbits to deer and horses — damaging young trees by eating the shoots and leaves or stripping the bark. Check the guards in spring and autumn to ensure they are effective (no bark missing, or twigs bitten or broken off) and not rubbing or cutting into the tree.

- If a guard is inadequate, add more protection, e.g. a taller tube to protect against deer, or fencing to keep off cows and other farm animals.

- Repair/replace damaged guards.

- If a guard is damaging the tree, adjust, modify or replace it.

- Remove the guard when risk of damage no longer exists

5. **...And your stakes**

In the first year of a tree's life, you can stake your tree to reduce the chance of breakage from strong winds. When you tie the tree to the stake, leave room for the trunk to move and sway to encourage strong trunk growth. Check on the stake and the tie. It should allow the tree to sway, without rubbing on stake or tie. The tree stem should not be under pressure from the tie. Does the tree still need a stake? Check this in spring by releasing the tie and if the tree stays upright, remove the stake. If the tree leans and the roots move, re-tie it to a shortened stake.

6. **Clear away weeds**

Pull up or hoe any grass and weeds carefully (to avoid root damage) for a radius of at least half a metre around the stem. When the soil is moist early in the year, cover the cleared area with a mulch mat, bark or brushwood chippings, or old piece of water-permeable carpet. This helps retain moisture near the roots and reduces competition from weeds, and the risk of damaging the tree with grass-cutting machinery. It also removes the need for damaging grass-cutting machinery to be anywhere near the tree.

7. **Keep pests away**

Mice, rabbits, voles and deer like to nibble through young tree bark and snack on the softer material within, which could be fatal for a young tree. Keeping a space between your mulch and the trunk will also help to protect tree trunks from pests. Check your trees regularly – if you spot

evidence of hungry pests, you can protect your tree by using plastic tree guards or quarter-inch wire cages. Once the tree has grown to 3m, you should be able to remove your tree guards.

8. **Prune your trees**

Careful formative pruning can prevent problems in later life – but shouldn't be done until the tree has gone into dormancy for the winter, to prevent new growth occurring which is too vulnerable to survive the colder winter months. If a tree has two competing leading shoots, removing one at an early stage to leave a single main shoot can save the tree from possible major branch failure in years to come. Gently saw broken or struggling branches off close to the trunk, but without removing the bulge near the trunk (called the collar). Saw square to the branch to keep the cut clean, reducing damage to the tree's bark.

By giving a little tree care during the cold winter months, you give your new trees the best chance at life. Soon it'll be spring, and time to get weeding! After planting and for the next few years, you should check the tree in March or April to see how the tree is getting on.