

National Collections of Birch & Alder trees

Patron: Lord Howick

Important planting tips - Planting guidelines for Birch and Alder

Trees that have been supplied by us must be cared for in the manner set out below. We will not replace, or be held liable for the demise of, any tree where these guidelines have not been strictly followed.

Bare-root trees

Where we have supplied trees lifted from our nursery field, they should ideally be planted within a few days of lifting. We use a "next day" delivery service and we do not dispatch at the end of a week; so there is no reason why the trees should not arrive in perfect condition. It is the roots of the tree that are the most in need of care. They are not designed to be exposed to the elements and are not equipped with any protective outer layer. The roots must under no circumstances be allowed to dry out and must NEVER be exposed to the wind or intense cold. Store in a frost-proof area (but not warm). If you are unable to plant the tree straight away, then it is acceptable to "heel in" the tree for a week or two. This involves digging a trench or hole and laying the tree down with the root in the hole, which is then covered loosely but generously with soil (the roots, not the tree!). In dry conditions the soil will need to be drenched and kept moist. You do not need to firm the soil, but you must not have any air pockets around the roots. Make sure the roots are well covered with soil. Trees correctly heeled in can survive in this state for a couple of weeks without sustaining damage.

Pot-grown trees

If supplied in winter, the tree should be kept in its pot until you are ready to plant it. Keep the soil in the pot moist, but not waterlogged. Unless the weather is particularly severe, the pot can be stood outdoors. But it should not be allowed to blow over, as this could cause it to dry out and may even cause the rootball to shed the pot. Ideally, once removed from the pot the roots of pot-grown trees should be "gently" teased apart, to encourage root growth and spread, but take great care not to break any roots. If in doubt, do not tease them apart.

For pots supplied during the growing season, it is essential to keep the pot moist (but not water-logged). Also use a plant food mixed with the water if the tree is to stay in the pot for some time.

Planting your tree

Dig a hole big enough to accommodate the root system with a little extra room around and below it. Part-fill the base of the hole with a mixture of compost, top-soil and fertilizer (we use osmocote-type controlled release fertilisers). Then place the root in the centre of the hole. Fill around the root system with more of the mixture, firming this down until level with the top of the roots. Make sure the roots are completely covered, but try not to cover any of the lower part of the stem. It should be easy to see the old soil "tide mark" that indicates how far up the stem the tree was previously planted. In very heavy clay soils, it is sometimes a good idea to only dig a shallow hole, half-bury the roots, then heap soil up around the base to the correct level. This creates a slightly raised area on which the tree will stand. In this way, you are improving the drainage around the root system. This is not necessary for Alders, which are much better able to cope with boggy conditions.

How far apart to plant them?

When planting trees, you need to think about what effect you are trying to achieve in the long term. Birch are very tolerant of being planted closely together in groups. So if you want a copse of trees with many stems closely grouped and one mass of foliage, then you can plant the trees as closely as a foot or two apart. When planted this close as a large group, the trees will grow thin and tall, and will lose their lower branches by the time they are about 20 feet high due to the low light levels under the canopy. If you want to see the shape of the trees, then obviously they need wider spacing. Between 10 and 30 feet apart, depending on the species. For a multi-stemmed look, you can plant three trees within about 6 inches to a foot, pruning out the inward facing branches to create the appearance of one multi-stemmed tree.

Alders generally should be planted further apart. The big tree alders will spread more than a birch and need anywhere between 10 and 50 feet between trees if you want to see their individual form. Only the green alders, which are generally more shrubby, look good when planted within a few feet of each other. With all planting schemes, bear in mind what access you need between the trees when they are mature. Do you need to walk between them or get a vehicle between them? Are they near overhead wires or buildings? Think of the long term effect on the view and light levels.

Staking the tree

Recent research suggests only staking trees for their first year or two, and then only using low stakes. The object of the stake is to hold the root firmly in the ground so that it cannot rock and loosen itself from the surrounding soil. It is not necessary to support the entire length of the stem. Indeed, this can be detrimental to root development. For seedlings up to 4 foot high, a cane pushed firmly into the ground will suffice. Hold the tree to this by using a good tree tie fixed low down the stem.

For larger trees up to about 8 feet in height, you will need a tree stake (approx. One inch square timber) hammered diagonally into the ground, with the tree secured to it fairly low down the stem. Putting the stake in diagonally avoids any damage to the root. On sloping ground, the stake should point away from the slope. On flat ground, the stake should point into the prevailing wind. Fix the tree to this stake using a good quality tree tie with a spacer that will prevent the bark from rubbing on the stake. Trees larger than 8 foot or in particularly exposed areas may need more support. We can advise on all types of tree support on request.

Tree Guards

If Rabbits or Deer are likely to be a problem (and there is nothing tastier than a young tree), then you will need to protect the stem. We use wrap-around spiral tree guards, but you can use the tube or mesh type. If the trees could suffer damage from grazing livestock, then you will either need to fence off the trees or use fairly solid tree guards with the stake positioned vertically. In this instance the stake must be placed in the hole at the time of planting.

Labelling

It is worth labelling the trees with some form of permanent label. Either for your own benefit or for others should you move. The labels we supply are only meant for immediate identification purposes and the ink will fade fairly rapidly. There are many good brands of label on the market.

Aftercare

Buying and planting ornamental trees is a costly and time-consuming business. There is a tendency for people to spend a lot of effort on this part of the gardening project, but then ignore the trees once they are in the ground. But it is during their first year following transplanting that they are at their weakest. A lot of preventable tree deaths occur in this period.

Stress

The first year for a transplanted tree is very difficult. Conditions that mature trees are coping with, may be too much for a newly-transplanted tree. Insufficient water, lack of nutrients, or damage by animals, insects, etc will all put great stress on a tree that is fighting to get it's roots down and survive. Obvious signs of stress are wilting or scorched leaves, excessive leaf-drop during the summer, drooping branches, dying twigs or branches and die-back of the top shoots. If your tree shows any of these signs, then you need to act promptly or the tree will suffer and probably die. Stress is not a condition, but a symptom of one of the following problems:-

Roots

Regular checking of the base of the tree is essential to check that the roots have not become loose in the ground. High winds, animal damage or drought can cause disturbance of the roots. Loose, wobbly roots will not be able to draw up water and the tree will die very quickly. If they are loose, push your heel down very firmly all around the root to firm the soil and get rid of any large air pockets. You may then need to add some topsoil.

Water

Newly transplanted trees need plenty of water. Even during a grey, overcast spell of weather there may not be much actual rainfall, so a good soaking may be required every few days during the growing season, depending on your soil conditions. It may be worthwhile investing in some kind of irrigation system. A Mulch mat or a layer of mulch can be helpful too, as this will slow down evaporation. However, mulch will disguise any looseness of the roots, so be aware of this. Be particularly vigilant during very hot, dry spells.

Pests and Diseases

Young trees are very prone to insect attack because of their soft stems and shoots. Aphids can be a serious menace as can caterpillars, destroying the leaves and limiting the tree's ability to produce food and energy. Regular checks will highlight any infestations, which should immediately be dealt with. Diseases like fire blight can be lethal, but are thankfully quite rare. Always make regular checks on the condition of the bark and leaves, and look out for any discolouration or mould.

If in doubt, contact us!

We pride ourselves in growing trees of good quality and in good health. But even apparently healthy trees can fail and under-perform. If you need help with a problem or are in any way concerned for the health of your trees, please get in touch with us. We will probably be able to help with advice and save the trees. However, if the worst happens and despite following the advice in this leaflet, you still lose any trees; then we will replace them as long you tell us within twelve months of purchase. All we ask is that you let us know as soon as a problem occurs, rather than waiting for the tree to die.