

# Planting a tree in a container

**Trees can be planted in containers (pots). This will limit their size, as the roots will not be able to grow very large. Here are some tips for successfully raising a tree in a container.**

## **Choose your variety of tree**

Avoid trees whose natural habit is to become large spreading monsters, since they will be the least happy in a container. Birch are ideal as they have relatively slender growth.

Make sure the young tree you buy has roots that are smaller than the container. You do not want to have to cut off any root to fit it into the container. This would seriously set the tree back and could cause parts of it to die.

## **Choose your container**

The container needs to be stable, as it will have to stay upright in strong winds. Ideally you want a container at least 50cm across and 40cm deep (go for a bigger container if you want the tree to get to a reasonable height). Obviously the wider the container, the more stable it will be. You need plenty of drainage holes at the base to let out excess water. It will also need to be frost-proof.

## **The growing medium**

You need weight for stability, moisture retention (as pots dry quicker than the ground), and aeration for good drainage. So a mixture of a loam based compost (such as John Innes No. 3), with a good amount of chunky peat or bark-based compost and a generous helping of large grit should fit the bill.

## **Looking after the tree**

There are three main problems with containers.

1. The roots cannot search far and wide for water. So in dry spells the tree could suffer very quickly.
2. The soil in the container is static. Nothing is naturally being added to it by leaf fall or erosion and it is not very active with soil-based life. So it is not acting in the way a natural soil would.
3. It is a very enclosed environment and any pests that get in can do a lot of damage without having any natural predators within the container.

So you need to keep the soil in the container moist. You also need to feed the tree. You can do both jobs at once if you use a soluble feed. Make sure it is a feed that gives the right balance of nutrients. Avoid feeds that are for fruit production such as tomato feeds, as they will be too biased towards high concentrations of potassium. Removing some topsoil every year and

replacing with a top dressing of compost and fertilizer can also help. The biggest pest will probably be the larvae of Vine Weevil. These little maggot-like creatures can completely destroy a root system as they eat through it during late summer and into the winter. You won't know you have them until it is too late, so take pro-active measures by applying an appropriate pesticide to the soil every summer to kill the larvae. Biological controls are also available.

It may be worthwhile rigging up an automated irrigation system, especially if you are likely to forget or be away for long periods. If the soil dries out in the container, then it shrinks and a gap forms around the edge of the container. This results in most of the water running straight out of the bottom of the container, which is of no use to the tree. So ensure the container does not dry out.

As with all young trees, the young juicy stems and foliage can be attacked by sap-suckers and leaf eaters such as aphids and caterpillars. These can do tremendous damage to a young tree and will seriously limit its ability to establish. You need to regularly check the leaves and stems, particularly the growing tips. Control by either squashing the pests or spraying them with a pesticide.

## **Maintenance**

As the tree grows you may need to prune out damaged branches or shape the tree in a way you like, though avoid pruning the leader (main stem) unless you radically need to control height. With pruning, always use this philosophy:-

Each branch provides energy for the tree. I am hindering the tree by removing a limb, so do I really need to do it?

Think about winter gales. Is the container likely to get blown over? You may need to anchor it or move it to a more sheltered spot. And even in winter, the soil will still need to be watered, as most of the rain will miss the container.