



Home Pecan Care

February 23, 2012

If there's one topic I've received the most questions on since I've started work in Madison County, it's probably pecan tree management. With the past drought and stressful conditions, most pecan trees have either been feast or famine in terms of nut production. With all the questions floating around on pecans, here's hoping this week's article answers some questions.

The most important aspect of pecan management starts before you ever plant the tree, and that's proper selection of a variety. With insect and disease management difficult in home orchards since it takes specialized equipment to handle spraying large trees, resistant pecan varieties are a must to ensure healthy plants. Commonly found cultivars adequate for home orchard plantings include Elliot, Excel, Gloria Grande and Sumner. These cultivars are readily obtained from most pecan tree nurseries that serve the southeastern United States. Other cultivars well-suited to backyard orchards include Amling, Carter, Gafford and McMillan; however, their availability is limited. To ensure good pollination, plant at least two varieties. This is especially important for areas with few surrounding pecan trees.

When planting trees, you should space seedlings at least 60 to 80 feet apart to prevent overcrowding as the trees mature. They should also be planted well away from buildings and power lines. Seedlings are often bought as bare-root seedlings but can also be obtained in containers. In either case, trees should be planted while still dormant to reduce stress and when adequate soil moisture is available. If possible, plant trees the day they are received from the nursery. Many trees bought from mail-order dealers or garden centers will have been out of the ground for several days. If these trees have been stored and handled properly, they should survive and grow. If trees appear dry, soak them in water for several hours to refresh them prior to planting. The major causes of death and/or low vigor in young pecan trees are drying before planting and failing to supply adequate moisture for the first two years following transplanting.

The planting hole should be at 12-24 inches wide and at least 3 feet deep. You should set the tree in the hole at the same depth it was grown in the nursery, usually indicated by a color change in the bark. Planting a tree too deep will result in suffocation of the roots. Some root trimming is allowed if they are twisted, broken, or excessively long. When filling the hole, level, but do not pack soil around the tree. After planting, prune 1/3 to 1/2 of the top of the tree and remove any branches to compensate for the large proportion of roots lost when the tree was dug.

Watering of new trees is as important as variety selection. Newly planted seedlings require 10-15 gallons weekly for the first two or three years due to their limited root system.

Do not place fertilizer in the planting hole as it may burn the roots, damaging or killing the tree. To accurately determine fertilizer and lime needs, take a soil sample prior to planting. If no soil test was made, use a general rate of about one pound of 5-10-15 fertilizer distributed in a 25-square-foot area around the tree. Make this application in June following planting. The following year, apply one pound of 10-10-10 fertilizer in March and again in June. Do not place fertilizer within 12 inches of the trunk. For older trees, and in the absence of a leaf or soil analysis, broadcast four pounds of a complete fertilizer such as 10-10-10 for each inch of trunk diameter (measure 4½ feet above soil level), up to a maximum of 25 lbs. per tree. Ammonium nitrate may also be used at a rate of one lb. per inch of trunk diameter, up to a maximum of eight lbs. per tree. This fertilizer should be applied in mid- to late March. Zinc nutrition is especially important in pecan production. Zinc needs are best determined by analyzing leaf samples taken in late July or early August. This can be done through our office. In the absence of a leaf analysis, apply one pound of zinc sulfate to young trees and three to five pounds to large trees each year. A soil pH of 6.0 to 6.5 assures the availability of essential nutrients. If the pH is too low or too high, uptake and use of nutrients is impaired. Apply lime as suggested in the soil test report to correct low soil pH.

We have lots more information on pecan care and management, including insect and disease control and nuisance wildlife. Feel free to contact our office for more information.