The period from November through February is the best time to plant trees, and the selection and placement of trees in your landscape are very important decisions that should not be taken lightly.

After all, no other plants are as long-lived or will have as profound an effect on their surroundings. And no other plants can create the major problems poorly selected or improperly placed trees will.

The most common mistakes include planting too many trees, planting trees that grow too large for their site, planting trees not well adapted to north Florida and planting trees too close to the house.

Remember that the trees you plant will grow much larger than the saplings you purchase and bring home from the nursery. It is tempting to plant more trees than you really need and then realize years later that you made a terrible mistake. Since cutting down a tree is never an easy decision, it is better not to put yourself (or whoever owns the property later) in that situation.

**Selecting Trees**

There is no one perfect tree for north Florida. All trees have advantages and disadvantages, depending on the planting location and desired characteristics. But there are some points you need to consider when planting trees in this area:

– Select a tree that will mature at the appropriate size. I cannot stress this enough. Generally, small trees are those that grow 15-25 feet tall, medium-sized trees grow 30-55 feet tall and large trees are those that grow 60 feet or taller.

– Think about the purpose of the tree and why you feel it is needed. This will help you determine what characteristics the tree should have, such as its shape, size and rate of growth. Ornamental features such as flowers, attractive berries, brightly colored fall foliage or unusual bark also should be considered.

– Decide if you want a tree that retains its foliage year-round (evergreen) or loses its leaves in the winter (deciduous). Deciduous trees are particularly useful where you want shade in the summer and sun in the winter. Evergreen trees can often be more maintenance because the drop their leaves 12 months out of year as opposed to all at one time for deciduous trees.

– Choose trees that are well adapted to our growing conditions. They must be able to tolerate long, hot summers and mild winters. A number of northern species of beech, maple, conifers and others you might see in catalogs are...
unsuitable for our area.

– Always look up, down and around your selected site. Check the location of overhead power lines and, if you must plant under them, use small, low-growing trees. Also consider underground water lines and septic tanks, as well as walks, drives and paved surfaces that may be damaged by the roots of large trees. Locate large trees at least 15 feet away from your house and paved surfaces. This is the time it is very important to know what the mature size of your tree is going to be.

**Planting Properly**

How a tree is planted plays a significant part in how well it establishes and grows. Plant trees properly according to these steps:

– Dig the hole at least twice the diameter of the root ball and no deeper than the height of the root ball.

– Remove container-grown trees from the container. If the rootball is tightly packed with thick, encircling roots, try to unwrap, open up or even cut some of the roots to encourage them to spread into the surrounding soil. Place the rootball in the hole.

– Place balled and burlapped trees into the planting hole, remove any nails, nylon twine or the wire basket that has been used to secure the burlap, and fold down the burlap from the top half of the root ball.

– The top of the root ball should be level with or slightly above the surrounding soil. It is critical that you do not plant trees too deep.

– Thoroughly pulverize the soil dug out from the hole and use this soil, without any additions, to backfill around the tree. Add soil around the tree until the hole is half full, then firm the soil to eliminate air pockets but do not pack it tight. Finish filling the hole, firm again and then water the tree thoroughly to settle it in.

– Generally, fertilizer is not applied to trees planted in the fall, although some slow-release fertilizer could be applied next spring. The use of a root stimulator solution is optional.

– Stake the tree if it is tall enough to be unstable; otherwise, it’s not necessary. When staking, drive two or three stakes firmly into the ground just beyond the root ball. Use strips of cloth or old nylon stockings – or use wire covered with a piece of garden hose where it touches the trunk – tied to the stakes and then to the trunk of the tree. This next part is very important but often overlooked - Leave the support in place no more than 9-12
months.

Keep the area 1 foot to 2 feet out from the trunk of a newly planted tree mulched and free from weeds and grass. This encourages the tree to establish faster by eliminating competition from grass roots. It also prevents lawn mowers and string trimmers from damaging the bark at the base of the tree, which can cause stunting or death. Just keep in mind the mulch should be about 3 to 4 inches deep and pulled back slightly from the base of the tree.

Water a newly planted tree whenever the weather is dry, especially the first summer after planting. This is the single most important step you can take to help ensure its survival.