



ASK A MASTER GARDENER

WHY FALL IS THE BEST TIME TO PLANT

By Laurie Meyerpeter, Placer County Master Gardener

Q Why is fall the best time to plant?

A Field tests of fall planted shrubs versus those which are planted in the spring show that the fall planted have significantly more growth than those planted in the spring, even when the added amount of time for growth is factored in. These results have been duplicated in other studies with other plants as well. A healthier and more extensive root system is believed to account for a large part of the difference in size. Although autumn temperatures begin to cool, the soil is still warm for many weeks, giving plant roots time to grow. Winter rains further soak the roots and encourage the beginning of an extensive root system so that the plant seems to explode with new growth the following spring.

By planting in the fall, plants will need less water the following summer making them less prone to diseases like root rot that thrive on the warm wet conditions prevalent in irrigated landscapes. California native plants are especially vulnerable to these fungi and fall planting is especially important for natives, but most plants also benefit. In addition to healthier plants, a homeowner will encounter lower water bills as well.

Late fall is also a great time to choose trees and shrubs for fall color and allows a gardener to see leaf coloration on individual trees.

There is a downside to planting in the fall: the selection and availability of some plants may be limited at the end of the season. In addition, some plants may look scruffy, especially plants that have recently finished their flowering cycle. (Note: many garden centers discount these plants in the autumn, so watch for great sales.) Rural gardeners who rely on seasonal irrigation water will need another water source to irrigate until the rains begin. And while fall is the best time for planting, spring is still a good time for planting and is the preferred time to plant frost-sensitive plants.

Yes, fall is the best time for planting most trees, shrubs, grasses, and perennials. Better growth, healthier plants, and reduced water usage are all important reasons, but the best reason of all is that autumn is such a glorious time to be out in the garden!

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