

Plant a Family Tree

Overview: Plant a tree with a child and you're likely to also seed a fond memory that will grow into a deep connection with the tree as both child and tree mature. Planting a tree is a gift, not only to yourself and your family, but to those in decades to come who may enjoy its springtime flowers, summer shade, colorful fall leaves, evergreen branches, or winter silhouette.



Materials:

- Tree reference book or Internet access for research
- Tree
- Shovel

Approximate Time to Complete: 2- 3 hours

Location: Outdoor

Ages: All Ages

Season: fall, winter and spring (the best time will vary based on your location)

Instructions

Trees benefit our landscapes and the broader environment in so many ways. They provide food and shelter to a wide array birds, beneficial insects, and other wildlife. Their roots help capture rainwater and prevent storm runoff from polluting the watershed. When placed properly, trees can help us reduce our energy needs by moderating winter winds and summer heat. Some even give us a harvest of tasty, healthful fruits. Trees also help to purify the air we breathe. Tree foliage filters out pollutants such as nitrogen oxide, sulfur dioxide, and ozone, which contribute to both smog and greenhouse gases, as well as dust and other harmful particulates. Trees help the environment by taking up carbon dioxide, the greenhouse gas that is such a big driver in climate change, and storing the carbon in their wood. It's been estimated that the urban trees alone growing in the U.S. (excluding Alaska and Hawaii) sequester nearly 23 million tons of carbon each year!

In many parts of the country, fall is the perfect time to plant trees because the soil is still warm enough for roots to become established before winter sets in, but deciduous trees and shrubs have dropped their leaves and require no energy from the roots for growth. In warmer climates where the ground does not freeze, winter months may be a good time to plant. In areas with harsher winters, you may want to wait until after the soil warms in the spring. One way to determine your best planting time is to check when your [state celebrates Arbor Day](#).

1. Begin by selecting a location to plant your tree. Check for underground utilities like electric, cable, and gas lines by calling [Dig Safe 811](#). Also check for overhead obstacles such as electrical and phone lines. Remember — your tree will grow! Once you choose a location, take note of the soil, space and sunlight available.

Just like all plants, different trees prefer different conditions so you will need this information to select the best tree for your chosen site.

2. Research tree options using printed or online tree guides. Letting your children help with the selection of the tree will add their excitement when planting the tree. If your space is limited, make sure to look for a tree with a smaller mature size (remember to consider both height and canopy spread). For best results, choose an appropriate native species where possible; it is likely to be well-adapted to your conditions and the most useful to wildlife as habitat and as a food source. If you do not choose a native tree, make sure your chosen tree is hardy in your area. Also consider flowering time and color, if it fruits, and if it will need special pruning and care. Experienced garden center staff or state and local Extension Service and Master Gardener staff are often wonderful resources to help you select the best tree for your landscape.

3. Take a family trip to a tree nursery or garden center. Here are a few tips to help you select your tree:

Although many garden centers offer large trees for an “instant” landscape, when purchasing a tree or shrub, it's actually better (and usually cheaper) to select a smaller specimen. It will have experienced less transplant shock and, once planted in your yard, will recover and grow faster than a large nursery specimen. Consider finding a tree the height of your child or grandchild. You'll be able to measure and compare the growth of both every year.

Check branch angles and roots. At the nursery, select trees and shrubs with good branch angles and few, if any, broken or diseased branches. Look carefully at the roots of container plants to be sure they aren't root bound. Healthy roots will be white. If the roots encircle the container a little, the plant is still a good purchase. Select another tree if the root ball is all roots and almost no soil, and the roots are pale brown in color. If you buy a tree or shrub with a root ball wrapped in burlap, make sure the tree and root ball move together when you rock them. This means the roots are clinging well to the soil and the tree will transplant better.

4. Plant your tree. Check out the tree planting instructions from KidsGardening: <https://kidsgardening.org/gardening-basics-plant-a-tree>.
5. Keep your kids involved! Be sure to let them help as much as possible with the actual planting and care of the young tree; anything that involves digging in the dirt or spraying water from a hose is bound to entice them. Encourage kids to continue to observe and learn about the tree as it grows. Do its leaves change color in the fall? Are there birds nesting or feeding in its branches? Does the color or texture of the bark on the trunk change as the tree matures?
6. Don't forget to name the tree! For a great winter project, help your child make a weatherproof plant sign with the tree's botanical name, its common name, and the name your family chose for it. Hold a special naming ceremony in spring as you place the plant tag in the ground near the tree.
7. Once your new tree is in the ground, gather the family around it for a group photo. Make this picture taking an annual event and collect the photos together in an album. As the years pass you'll create a wonderful keepsake to pass down, a true family tree. Who knows? Perhaps years from now your grandchildren or great-grandchildren will add photos of themselves and their families standing beneath

the spreading branches of the now stately tree that was once a spindly sapling
planted by you and your children long ago.