

PLANTING A TREE IN YOUR PARKWAY? HERE'S WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW.

Prepared by diana nicole, CHP, OLC

Despite ambitious tree planting programs, city tree canopies have been in decline. Twenty-five to 40% of street trees die within the first 6 years after planting. Only a small percentage of them will still be alive at age 35. What are we doing wrong? The high mortality rates have to do with poor planting techniques, but no single activity contributes more to tree mortality than a lack of care after planting. Most people love to get a free tree for their parkway, but should consider that keeping trees alive, healthy and safe requires a considerable amount of care and maintenance that the City of Los Angeles does not provide.

Young Tree Care Basics

Watering and care after planting depends on who plants the tree.

In the City of Los Angeles, the adjacent property owner is personally responsible for watering and maintenance of trees they plant in the parkway. The City, or one of its tree planting partners, will stake and water trees it plants in the parkway for 3 years. After 3 years, the adjacent property owner goes back to being responsible for watering and maintaining the tree, though the City

may return to prune mature trees over the years when funding allows. Here are some tree care basics you need to know for the survival of your tree: **Water** - Young trees need to be watered frequently for many years (more than 3 years) as they mature. Irrigation is most efficiently applied to the soil surface using drip or bubbler system which is designed to deliver water slowly, minimize evaporation, and prevent runoff. **Weed** - Keep tree wells or the ground under the tree's leafy canopy free of weeds, plants, flowers, grasses, weed cloth, gravel, boulders, decomposed granite, or artificial grass. **Mulch** - A 3 inch to 4 inch thick layer of mulch should be maintained directly over the tree rooting area to conserve water, moderate soil temperatures, suppress weeds, and prevent soil compaction. On newly planted trees, mulch can increase root development by 400% compared to turf grass. This results in 20% faster canopy growth. But **care doesn't stop there**. [See next page for more on tree care and maintenance.](#)

Mature Tree Care Basics

Watering and most tree care is the responsibility of adjacent property owners.

The adjacent property owner is responsible for watering and maintenance of the parkway trees, though the City may return to prune over the years when funding allows. Here are some maintenance basics you need to know for the survival of your mature tree: **Water** - Even large 100 year old drought tolerant trees need water. **Weed** - Keep tree wells or the ground under the tree's leafy canopy free of

weeds, plants, flowers and grasses, weed cloth, gravel, boulders, decomposed granite, or artificial grass. One or two years of drought can be tolerated by many well established trees *only* if roots can explore soil unrestricted by curbs, buildings, roads, and other root barriers. **Mulch** - Trees in parkways of shredded organic mulch will be healthier and require less watering. But **care doesn't stop there**. [See next page for more on tree care and maintenance.](#)

More Tree Care & Maintenance Basics

Maintenance will help keep your street tree alive, healthy, and safe.

ALL TREES NEED WATER! Young and old trees alike, in man-made landscapes, must be watered by people to survive. ***Inconsistent, infrequent or insufficient watering*** forces the tree to produce only the foliage that it can sustain, which reduces the trees capacity to cool the air, and remove carbon and pollution from the atmosphere while

taking vital food and habitat away from wildlife. Foliage on drought stressed trees thins and drops beginning at the top center part of the canopy. This can be largely prevented with timely application of irrigation. Irrigation is most efficiently applied to the soil surface using drip or bubbler system which is designed to deliver water slowly, minimize evaporation, and prevent runoff. ***Newly planted trees*** - A one to two-inch diameter tree typically takes two to three years, a three-inch diameter tree typically takes three to four years, a four-inch diameter tree typically takes four to five years to establish. Apply 2 to 3 gallons of water over the root ball a minimum of three times each week the first few months. ***Young Trees*** - Apply 3 to 5 gallons of water per 1 inch of trunk diameter 2 to 3 times a week, twice the width of the root ball (this cannot be accomplished with watering bags). ***Mature Trees*** - Apply 10 gallons of water per 1 inch of trunk diameter (measured at breast height). Evergreens need heavy watering going into the winter, and need watering during winter droughts. It's important, particularly with mature, established trees, to water the entirety of the soil volume. Add water to wet the top 12 inches of soil every 2 to 4 weeks in extended drought.

Mulch. Trees planted in parkways of shredded organic mulch are healthier and require less watering. Mulch can improve root growth, especially during warm dry weather. Mulch also suppresses weeds and turf-grass that can compete with tree roots for moisture and nutrients. Mulch adds organic matter to the soil system and appears to encourage earthworms and other beneficial soil organisms. Killing the turf and adding mulch can improve health on declining trees. A 3 inch to 4 inch thick layer of mulch should be maintained directly over the tree rooting area. Maintaining mulch in the entire parkway adds to the health of the tree. Do not pile any mulch against the trunk and keep it off the root ball on newly planted trees (**keep mulch about 12 to 18 inches from the trunk for any size of tree**). Replenish the mulch as it deteriorates (usually twice a year is sufficient). Routine maintenance is required to ensure mulch is never up against the tree trunk.

Pruning Young Trees. Without guidance, young parkway trees can start to branch out in the wrong direction, causing multiple branches to grow that compete with one another to become the "leader". This type of structure makes the tree weaker. Training your young tree to grow the right way can be done by trimming competing branches, but the City of Los Angeles does not do this type of pruning. A certified arborist should be hired to avoid severe or long-term damage from an improper cut or over-cutting. About 25% of the young tree canopy is the absolute maximum that should be removed at any one time. **Pruning Mature Trees.** The City of Los Angeles does prune mature trees, when funding allows. However, mature trees may need pruning more often than the City has funding or time for. As always, certified arborists should be hired to prune street trees. Two of the main factors determining the appropriate amount of live canopy to remove are the age of the tree and the overall condition or health of the tree. As the age of the tree approaches maturity, even if the older tree is in generally good health, the upper limit should be decreased to 10% to 12% of live canopy because the pruning process, in general, can be a serious shock to the tree. Older trees have more trouble recovering from the shock of pruning. Pruning during wildlife nesting season (March – September) is bad for birds, other wildlife, and most trees.