



Extension and Industry: Spreading Roots and Branching Out with Tree Installation Training

BETH BOLLES¹, SHEILA DUNNING^{*2}, BLAKE THAXTON³, AND JOHN DAVY⁴

¹University of Florida, IFAS Escambia County Extension
3740 Stefani Rd., Cantonment, FL 32533

²University of Florida, IFAS Okaloosa County Extension
3098 Airport Rd., Crestview, FL 32539

³University of Florida, IFAS Santa Rosa County Extension
6263 Dogwood Dr., Milton, FL 32570

⁴Owner, Panhandle Growers Ornamental and Shade Tree Nursery
5975 Southridge Rd., Milton, FL 32570

ADDITIONAL INDEX WORDS. Extension, tree

University of Florida, IFAS Extension and Panhandle Growers have developed a training program to educate horticulture professionals. The objective was for 75% of participants to gain knowledge on several tree installation topics and techniques. The half-day training began with presentations on common tree installation problems, container vs. balled & burlap trees, and proper tree installation. Following instruction, Panhandle Growers personnel demonstrated the techniques using a large containerized tree and a B&B tree. A total of 39 horticulture professionals attended the training; 36 completed pre- and post-tests. Evaluations indicated: 100% (36) gained knowledge on recognizing tree installation problems, 100% (36) increased knowledge of planting techniques that promote tree establishment and survivability, 97% (35) increased knowledge of correct handling procedures, and 94% (34) declared their intention to utilize at least one newly acquired skill.

Numerous businesses in Northwest Florida specialize in the installation of ornamental trees. Other lawn maintenance companies are contracted to install large shrubs and trees. Panhandle Growers Ornamental and Shade Tree Nursery (Panhandle Growers) has seen the nursery industry take the blame for declining trees. However, Extension agents make site visits to these trees and diagnose the failure due to improper planting. Due to these observations, University of Florida, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) Extension and Panhandle Growers developed a training program to educate horticulture professionals. The overall objective was for 75% of participants to gain knowledge on several tree installation topics and techniques. The specific program objectives include:

1. Proactively prevent tree loss due to improper installation as a result of practice change by industry professionals.
2. Provide education on underlying issues that can lead to tree failures, including differences in production containers, handling procedures, and installation practices.
3. Demonstrate the proper preparation and techniques that promote tree establishment and survivability.
4. Reduce the number of accusatory occurrences received by nursery operations regarding poor quality plant material.

Methods

The target audience was identified as commercial horticulture professionals that perform tree installation. These professionals operate on a “time-is-money” mentality that may limit their ability to justify additional efforts that can proactively avoid future tree losses. Additionally, few landscape contractors have the opportunity to continue maintenance on the installation sites, making it difficult for them to follow the changes in the landscape over time. Ten years of site visits and personal interviews revealed a trend of common problems, including damage to stems and foliage during transport, improper rootball preparation, planting depth issues, and tree general failure to thrive. In most cases, standard maintenance practices and adoption of best management practices failed to result in trees that performed as expected by landscape professionals and their clientele. As a result, landscape professionals may have resorted to increased chemical intervention to solve tree problems. When pesticides and fertilizers didn’t correct the situation and the tree died, the contractors turned to the nursery supplier, accusing them of providing inferior plant material. This program teaches landscape professionals to recognize production contributions to rootball problems, practices that will correct the imperfections, techniques that prevent damage during transport, and proper tree installation that promote establishment and survivability.

Three PowerPoint presentations were developed: *Understanding Soil, Container vs. Balled-and Burlap Tree Production*, and *Proper Tree Installation*. A tree planting guide and information

*Corresponding author. Email: sdunning@ufl.edu

on the Florida Sunshine One Call (Call Before You Dig) system were provided. The program materials provide a quick reference for planting instructions and highlight the importance of staying safe when installing trees. As reinforcement to the classroom instruction, nursery personnel performed a live demonstration of both a 15-gallon containerized and a 4" caliper, balled-and burlap tree, using equipment that most landscape professionals utilize. Participants had the opportunity to observe all the techniques that were outlined in the multi-media presentations. Educational site visits were offered to professionals requiring on-site consultations to diagnose potential tree problems that may lead to failure.

Results

A total of 39 horticulture professionals attended the training; 36 completed both pre- and post-test surveys. Evaluations indicated:

- 100% (36) gained knowledge on recognizing common tree installation problems

- 100% (36) increased knowledge of tree planting techniques that promote tree establishment and survivability
- 97% (35) increased knowledge of correct handling procedures for container or B&B landscape trees
- 94% (34) intended to use a learned practice.

Conclusions

The training was an example of industry and Extension identifying and addressing a problem. Proper tree installation is beneficial to nursery producers, installers, and maintainers, not to mention the trees. A six-month follow-up survey will determine if there has been a reduction in complaints to the tree nurseries. The Extension agents of the Western Panhandle will offer supplemental programs annually that address tree-related issues.