

Clients will almost always want to know why a tree or shrub is looking bad or appears to be dying. You look for signs or symptoms of a disease or a pest but don't see anything that resembles an obvious cause for problems.

You ask about water - too much or too little? Have any chemicals have be applied in the area lately? Any recent construction or landscaping? How long has the problem has existed and the rate of decline. You look at the stem or trunk for damage. You look at other plants in the yard to see if they show any problems. You discuss how long the plant has been in that location.

What are your options?

- ▶ Spray? There might have been something there, right?
- ▶ Fertilize to help increase vitality? Might help, can't hurt?
- ▶ Prune it? Cut it back?
- ▶ More water or less water -depending on what the owner has been doing?
- ▶ New plant? Could be transplant shock ...
- ▶ Old plant? Well, these things happen.
- ▶ Still have questions? Need a soil test!
- ▶ Give up and replace it?

Your client wants an answer and you're the expert.

One option, often overlooked, and the source of many landscape problems, is planting depth.

After looking at a declining plant, checking for signs of disease and pests, asking about water and looking at the stem - keep on going right to the ground. Pull out your knife and dig away some of the soil or mulch at the base of the plant. You might be surprised at how often a plant has been planted substantially deeper than it should be. Common enough that depth is one of the first things I look at.

The effects of planting too deep are more serious than most people realize. While there are some plants more tolerant of deep planting, this situation results in additional stress being placed

on almost every kind of plant. All plants need to grow properly to live and deep planting does not help. The plants become less able to withstand the stresses of the site and then begin to decline, usually slowly.

Very often, the customer begins to notice a problem well after the initial signs have occurred. The hint of chlorosis or a crown beginning to thin out, with the symptoms usually increasing gradually from year to year, are often over-looked when describing problems and their on-set.

One obvious indication of a tree being too deep is that the trunk appears to be cylindrical where it comes out of the ground. Every tree should have slight to obvious flare at the base. If you don't see the flare, planting too deep is the first possibility, girdling roots the second (a tree with a flare on only one side of the trunk and a flat, straight surface on the other side could be an indication of a girdling root). Both reasons are well worth digging for. (In some cases it may not be a root that is girdling the tree but twine or artificial or treated burlap.) For a shrub, it may be a little more difficult to tell if it has been planted too deep, but if it has multiple stems and you cannot see the point where the stems are attached, you may have a depth problem.

In some cases, if the plant is not too far gone, removing the excess soil and mulch may help, along with some extra care and perhaps fertilizer and a proper watering regimen. For a more severe case of decline, an explanation of the evils of planting too deep and how to plant properly may be in order.

It does happen that even after checking everything about a declining plant, you still can't find a reason for the problem, and you now wish it was planted too deep. Then you may decide to take a soil sample, especially if the owner wants to try and save the plant. No guarantees, though, and there are other possible problems that range from water softeners to dryer outlets, root rots to nematodes, black walnut trees to spraying suckers with Roundup.

Sometimes even careful examination won't give you any answers - but make checking planting depth a standard procedure when looking for a problem. **LM**

Sick tree or shrub? Time to get 'in-depth'



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