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If you can still water outdoors, plant in the fall

By Dan Rahn
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You're planning to add landscape trees or shrubs next spring. But with the drought projected to last through the winter, it's vital to get a head start, if outdoor watering schedules permit.

Spring planting fever is always best if you catch it in the fall, said Gary Wade, a Cooperative Extension horticulturist with the University of Georgia College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences.

Shrubs planted in the spring often don't have time to get established, Wade said. They're hardly established before they're exposed to Georgia's stressful summer. Then, if the drought continues, water for the plant may be limited.

Roots and shoots compete for water and nutrients. In the spring, roots will send all the nutrients and water upstairs to form new leaves, flowers, fruits and branches. Little is left to grow more roots.

Then, just as the top gets too big for its roots, the inevitable hot, dry weather arrives. The plant's top demands more supplies than the roots can provide, and the plant starts abandoning branches or dropping leaves in a fight for survival.

"Planting in the fall is much less stressful than springtime planting," Wade said.

Trees and shrubs grown in containers can be planted anytime, he said. But if you plant in the fall, as the weather cools down, the plant gets a much better chance.

"Roots don't go dormant," he said. "They keep growing all winter. Even though the tops of deciduous plants go dormant for the winter and the tops of evergreen plants slow down, roots continue to grow. Since the tops demand little from the roots, the plants' energy can be funneled to the roots for growth and establishment."

Fall-planted ornamentals also have a supply of carbohydrates and other food substances stored in their roots from the previous growing season. This stored energy helps roots get established while the rest of the plant is resting.

"When spring does come, the plant will be able to pop with growth," Wade said.

What about winter stress? Not a problem. "As a rule, there's much less stress on plants during the fall and winter than during the summer in Georgia," Wade said.

When you plant in the fall, do almost everything just as you would in the spring. "The only big difference is that you don't want to fertilize when you plant in the fall," he said. "Wait until next February."

Wade offers some basic planting tips:

- Plant groupings of shrubs in

beds thoroughly cultivated 8 to 12 inches deep.

- For a single shrub, dig a planting hole at least twice as wide and as deep as the plant's root ball.

- Make sure the planting site drains well.

- When planting balled-and-burlapped plants, cut the cord or wire from around the stem and remove it. Then remove the top third or half of any burlap or fabric from around the root ball.

- Place the plant at the same depth it was grown in the nursery. Make sure the top of the root ball is level with the soil surface.

- Fill the hole with the same soil you removed. Lightly pack it with your hand, and water when it's half filled and completely filled to remove air pockets around the roots.

- Cover the planting surface with 3 to 5 inches of a mulch, such as pine straw, pine bark or even fall leaves. This is always important, but even more critical in a drought. Mulch conserves precious water.

- Water. Plants need water anytime it's dry during the fall or winter, just as they would during a dry spring or summer. However, in the fall, they're much more forgiving if you're a day late watering them.

(Dan Rahn is a news editor with the University of Georgia College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences.)