

# Twelve Ways to Make the Most out of a Tree or Plant Giveaway Program<sup>1</sup>

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**Purpose statement:** The purpose of this publication is to provide homeowners and gardeners with information about how to select the right tree for yard site conditions and insights about how to properly care for the trees after receiving them.

Tree and plant giveaway programs are often used by organizations and municipalities to increase tree canopy on private property and provide environmental education and community engagement. Tree giveaway programs are often offered during nationally recognized events such as Earth Day or Arbor Day, and on other significant dates. Tree and plant giveaway programs can provide a great opportunity to increase biodiversity and benefits from the many and varied services trees provide, including reducing stormwater runoff, providing habitat for wildlife, reducing energy use, reducing urban heat, removing air pollutants, and creating recreational spaces, especially in urban areas.

As residents prepare to participate in tree giveaway programs, here are twelve tips to be successful with these events.

## Before the Tree or Plant Giveaway Program

### 1. Research the types of tree (or plant) giveaway programs offered in your location.

First, residents should inquire whether they are eligible to participate in the advertised tree giveaway events. Some giveaways require proof of residence in a city or county, so it would be helpful to bring a driver's license or other official proof of residence. Additionally, it is important to be aware of location and other logistics (entrance, parking, tree loading protocol, availability of volunteers, etc.). Be aware of the types of trees offered (e.g., fruit, shade, flowering) and the sizes available. In most cases, program organizers will also provide a list of trees they will offer beforehand. If this list is not publicly available, please request it from the organizers. This information will be helpful to determine whether a particular event is a good fit for your particular tree or plant needs. To find out the locations of tree and plant giveaway programs, you can

visit your local cooperative Extension office, municipal or city office, Arbor Day Foundation, or other organizations that participate in community engagement and urban greening. In addition, there may be additional events listed on popular websites including Eventbrite and social media platforms such as Facebook or Instagram, and often most informative, word of mouth from other knowledgeable members of your community.

### 2. Do an inventory of your yard.

This step is critically important because it will help you decide which type of tree or plant is most suitable for your yard based on your unique characteristics and preferences. To make an inventory of your yard, take note of how much sunlight it gets, when, and over what area. Also helpful to keep in mind are your soil conditions, the size of your yard, and the already existing vegetation in your yard. You might need to consult a professional to ensure the accuracy of your inventory. There are various templates to conduct an inventory of your yard. One of the simpler ways to make an inventory is to use a sheet of paper to make a rough outline of your home and yard. This outline should include: 1) areas of your yard that are shaded, receive full sun, partial sun, etc.; 2) species names or common names of the plants already existing on your property and planting site; 3) size of existing spaces in your yard relative to neighboring trees and infrastructure like buildings, detached garages or sheds, children's play equipment, etc.; 4) water sources in your yard (rain barrels, water hoses, etc., and their distance from possible planting sites); 5) types of soil on your land such as clay, sandy, loamy, etc. (Please refer to "[Agricultural Soils of Florida](#)," Mylavarapu et al. 2016, for more details about types of soils found in Florida.)

## During the Tree or Plant Giveaway Program

### 3. Right Tree (or Plant), Right Place

Carefully select the most appropriate tree or plant for your yard. This selection should consider the unique characteristics of your yard along with the features of that specific species (Klein et al. 2023). For example, a tree that will grow upwards of 60 feet can have significant root

spread, so it's likely unsuitable for small planting spaces like the narrow strip between the sidewalk and the curb. Most tree giveaway programs will provide a fact sheet or other information about each tree or plant species so that you can make well-informed selections. Before choosing a tree, please read through the details provided about the species, which often include information about the expected height, crown spread, watering frequency and amounts, sunlight requirements, optimal placement to take best advantage of benefits the tree will provide, and preferred soil conditions for the tree to thrive. By reading through this detailed information, you can compare your yard characteristics to see if this plant or tree is appropriate for your yard. If you live in a hurricane- or wind-prone location, consider selecting a tree that has strong wind resistance to survive storms. Finally, call 811 to ensure it is safe to dig in the area you're planning to situate your tree. Call at least two days before you sink your shovel to avoid damaging underground facilities. (Refer to [Sunshine811.com](https://www.sunshine811.com) to confirm the safety of your planting site).

#### **4. Get as much information about tree care as possible. Don't be afraid to ask questions!**

While at the giveaway program, please ask any questions about the available tree species, urban site conditions, and maintenance. It is common for tree giveaway programs to supply participants with helpful handouts that detail tree planting, young tree pruning, and aftercare throughout the establishment period. The giveaway programs are often staffed by professionals and other knowledgeable experts, including urban foresters, municipal foresters, Master Gardener Volunteers, and horticultural experts. No question is too simple, and tree giveaway program organizers are hoping you will ask lots of them. They want you to be successful with your plantings.

#### **5. Participate in the workshop or demonstration session if available.**

Many tree or plant giveaway programs will also offer a planting demonstration session. This demonstration or workshop session will provide a learning experience, often hands-on, to teach participants the correct way to plant a tree or shrub, including how to prepare the soil, assess and care for your tree or plant's roots after removing it from the pot to ensure that it gets a healthy start, and general aftercare (e.g., irrigation, pruning, protection, and staking).

#### **6. Obtain contact information for affiliated professionals and seek out supplemental resources.**

While you are at the giveaway program, seek out contact information for the relevant professionals in your local area. Additionally, sometimes the event organizers offer home consultations to ensure that you plant your new plant in the right place. There are lots of online resources available to provide guidance on a variety of horticultural

species that are suitable for different hardiness zones and site conditions throughout Florida (e.g., Florida-Friendly Landscaping™, EDIS Southern Tree Fact Sheets, Florida Trees website, and the IFAS Landscape Plants website—refer to Table 1 for these and many more helpful resources).

## **After the Tree or Plant Giveaway Program**

#### **7. Plant soon after the event to avoid root defects.**

After receiving your plant, be prepared to re-pot it in a larger container or plant in the ground as soon as possible. Although some plants can survive and thrive in pots, it is best to avoid holding trees in containers for too long. This will prevent the plants from getting “pot bound” or “root bound,” a condition that happens when a plant stays in the container for too long and its roots outgrow the container. In addition, many containerized trees and plants may need extra attention (i.e., irrigation) due to the substrate being well-drained leading to decreased moisture. Planting them in the ground, by contrast, will allow the plants to access additional resources in the landscape during the establishment period (Gilman 2020d). The establishment period is when plants put on new root growth outward into the surrounding soil after they are planted (Gilman and Sadowski 2007). Depending on your hardiness zone, the length of the establishment period of plants in your yard may vary. To determine the hardiness zone you live in, refer to the USDA hardiness zone map for Florida. Likewise, for guidance on the length of the establishment period in your area, review the recommendation in the Florida Grades and Standards for Nursery Plants (Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Sciences 2022).

#### **8. Water as appropriate for the plant species you selected.**

Keep your new plant healthy by watering it as appropriate for its species. Some shrubs and trees require watering every day, several times per week, once per week, several times per month, once per month, or on some other schedule (Gilman n.d.; Table 1). Many tree giveaway programs will provide participants with species-specific information on how best to care for their new trees. This usually includes watering instructions as well as additional considerations for early tree care (e.g., fertilization, pruning) and best practices for adverse weather conditions such as extended drought (Gilman 2020b). If such information is not provided, participants can contact local UF/IFAS County Extension Agents to provide additional information on caring for your new tree. To find the Extension office in your area refer to the [UF/IFAS Extension website](https://www.ifas.ufl.edu/extension/). In addition to Extension agents, the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS) also has [County Foresters throughout the state](https://www.facs.org/county-foresters/) who can provide great assistance on tree species selection. (Refer to Table 1 for helpful resources.)

## 9. Mulch.

After planting your tree, it is helpful to evenly apply two to three inches of mulch in an approximate eight-foot-diameter circle around the tree (if space allows). Mulching will help with soil moisture retention as well as reduce the likelihood of mechanical damage from mowers or string trimmers. Note that applying a layer of mulch greater than 3 inches deep could have adverse effects on tree health (i.e., prevent irrigation or rainwater from reaching the roots) and make the tree less stable over time. Mulch that is too thick can encourage the tree to grow roots within the mulch rather than sending them deep down and outward into the surrounding soil. Additionally, when mulching around your newly planted tree, it is best to keep the mulch approximately 12 inches away from the trunk. Doing so will prevent the formation of stem-girdling roots. Also, if you plan to add new mulch annually to give it a refreshed appearance, it is best to remove some preexisting mulch before topdressing, to avoid unintentionally depriving the roots of water or encouraging them to grow too shallowly. Refer to Table 1 for additional resources.

## 10. Provide physical support for your plant if necessary.

Assuming you are planting high quality nursery stock void of any major defects (e.g., root issues, lack of trunk taper), then support systems (i.e., staking, guying) should not be necessary (Gilman 2020a). That said, sometimes trees require supplemental support during the establishment period to ensure that the tree stays upright. If your tree needs support, the most important thing to keep in mind is that the system should be adjusted periodically to prevent it from girdling the stem. Also, the support system needs to be removed when it is no longer needed, usually within a year of planting the tree. Aside from trees with major defects that may impact stability, occasionally, a tree planted in a wind prone area may need to be staked until it has had time to establish. The biggest thing to keep in mind is that support systems are *temporary*. If they are left on too long, they can do more harm than good.

## 11. Observe your tree for signs of stress or injury.

It is helpful to periodically monitor your tree for signs of stress, decline, other problems. To identify potential signs or symptoms that can adversely affect the establishment, health, and growth of your new planting, you must first familiarize yourself with what is normal so that you will be able to identify the abnormal when you see it. (Gilman 2020c; refer to Table 1 for helpful resources.) Many online resources provide information on common issues with trees and plants that you should be aware of so that you can spot problems while they're easy to address. In the event you are unable to determine the cause of a particular issue, your local Extension office can be a great resource. (Refer to Table 1 for helpful resources.)

## 12. Spread the word and invite other community members.

After the giveaway program, share your success stories with friends and family, and please invite people in your community to participate in the next one. Successful tree giveaway programs take community effort. The benefits from urban trees and greenspaces increase when they are widely distributed and properly cared for in communities. Increasing the number of trees and shrubs will reduce urban heat, for example, and planting several trees together maximizes the benefits to an urban area. You can spread the word by taking photos of your plants, sharing future events with others, and encouraging people in your community to participate using social media and word of mouth.

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## Table

Table 1. Resources and information to help with caring for your trees

Title	Description	Website/Link
USDA Plant Hardiness Zone Map	This USDA webpage allows you to enter your zip code in the search box at the top of an interactive map to find out your plant hardiness zone.	<a href="https://planthardiness.ars.usda.gov/">https://planthardiness.ars.usda.gov/</a>
Landscape Plants: Steps to planting a tree	This UF/IFAS webpage provides detailed information and illustrations on how to plant a tree.	<a href="https://hort.ifas.ufl.edu/woody/summary-planting.shtml">https://hort.ifas.ufl.edu/woody/summary-planting.shtml</a>
Find your local Extension office by region	This UF/IFAS website provides helpful information about how to find your local Extension office and provides a dropdown list by location in each of Florida's 67 counties.	<a href="https://sfyl.ifas.ufl.edu/find-your-local-office/">https://sfyl.ifas.ufl.edu/find-your-local-office/</a>
Landscape Plants: Solve problems	This UF/IFAS website describes common issues with the care, pruning, maintenance, and health of your trees and landscape plants.	<a href="https://hort.ifas.ufl.edu/woody/solve-problems.shtml">https://hort.ifas.ufl.edu/woody/solve-problems.shtml</a>
Landscape Plants: Florida trees	This UF/IFAS website provides a database with a large variety of Florida trees and shrubs and instructional videos on pruning, visual tree assessments, etc.	<a href="https://hort.ifas.ufl.edu/woody/">https://hort.ifas.ufl.edu/woody/</a>
Landscape Plants: Tree-staking systems (with illustrations)	This UF/IFAS webpage describes the best approaches to tree-staking systems.	<a href="https://hort.ifas.ufl.edu/woody/staking.shtml">https://hort.ifas.ufl.edu/woody/staking.shtml</a>
Landscape Plants: Maintenance index of topics	This UF/IFAS website describes common issues with the maintenance and health of your trees and landscape plants.	<a href="https://hort.ifas.ufl.edu/woody/maintenance-subject-index.shtml">https://hort.ifas.ufl.edu/woody/maintenance-subject-index.shtml</a>
Landscape Plants: Damaging actions and agents	This UF/IFAS website describes common issues with the maintenance and health of your trees and landscape plants.	<a href="https://hort.ifas.ufl.edu/woody/damages-trees.shtml">https://hort.ifas.ufl.edu/woody/damages-trees.shtml</a>
Landscape Plants: Tree care and drought	This UF/IFAS webpage describes the best approaches to maintaining healthy trees during droughts.	<a href="https://hort.ifas.ufl.edu/woody/drought.shtml">https://hort.ifas.ufl.edu/woody/drought.shtml</a>
Landscape Plants: Remove stakes	This UF/IFAS webpage describes the best approaches to removing stakes from plants.	<a href="https://hort.ifas.ufl.edu/woody/stake-management.shtml">https://hort.ifas.ufl.edu/woody/stake-management.shtml</a>
Landscape Plants: Mulch can damage trees	This UF/IFAS webpage describes the negative impacts of improperly applied mulch on trees.	<a href="https://hort.ifas.ufl.edu/woody/over-mulching.shtml">https://hort.ifas.ufl.edu/woody/over-mulching.shtml</a>
Landscape Plants: Mulch is ideal for establishing trees, but do it right	This UF/IFAS webpage describes the best approaches to applying mulch on trees.	<a href="https://hort.ifas.ufl.edu/woody/mulching.shtml">https://hort.ifas.ufl.edu/woody/mulching.shtml</a>



Landscape Plants: Irrigation	This UF/IFAS webpage describes the best approaches for irrigating your trees.	<a href="https://hort.ifas.ufl.edu/woody/irrigation.shtml">https://hort.ifas.ufl.edu/woody/irrigation.shtml</a>
Florida Forest Service County Foresters	This webpage from the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS) provides a list of County Foresters in Florida.	<a href="https://www.fdacs.gov/Forest-Wildfire/Our-Forests/Florida-Forest-Service-Office-Locations/County-Foresters/Find-a-County-Forester">https://www.fdacs.gov/Forest-Wildfire/Our-Forests/Florida-Forest-Service-Office-Locations/County-Foresters/Find-a-County-Forester</a>
Florida-Friendly Landscaping™ Program	This UF/IFAS website provides details about the nine principles of Florida-Friendly Landscaping™.	<a href="https://ffl.ifas.ufl.edu/">https://ffl.ifas.ufl.edu/</a>

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