

Can trees and shrubs be moved?

By R. W. Sidwell

Inevitably in all gardens there comes a time when shrubs seem to be in the wrong place. Either plans have changed, the shrubs have just grown and got overcrowded or perhaps one has inherited a garden from a previous owner who seemed to have different ideas about garden layout. The question therefore arises, can they be transplanted?

If they are ceanothus or cistus the answer is a straightforward "No". These two plants seem to be particularly sensitive to root disturbance even after one year's growth.

Shrubs producing a dense mass of fibrous roots close to the base of the plant usually transplant quite well. Hydrangeas are a case in point. Ten-year-old plants can be moved without difficulty. Kolkwitzia, spiraea, most of the hebes and cotoneasters can certainly be transplanted when five to ten-years-old.

Roses have a straggly sort of root system with very little fibre close to the base and I am often amazed at the poorness of the roots on ordinary one-year-old nursery roses offered for sale. Yet they seem to establish themselves. I have transplanted four and five-year-old roses and had excellent re-establishment. I would not like to set a limit to the age at which roses can be transplanted except to say that it is partly a matter of size. The larger shrub roses will become difficult to handle after five years.

If time allows, the best way of moving large shrubs is to cut the roots with a sharp spade at a convenient working distance from the base a year before transplanting is to take place. A new fibrous root system will then have a chance to develop and the shrub will get adjusted to the loss of its larger roots.

Most deciduous shrubs transplant well at the commencement of winter. Avoid the coldest midwinter weather but late winter and early spring is an excellent time.

Evergreens transplant quite well in the autumn if winters are mild and moist. Dry, cold east winds can extract moisture from the leaves at a time when it cannot be replaced through the roots, and transplanting in the spring, even as late as May, will often give better results.

Treatment after transplanting has to meet conflicting requirements. New roots will be produced most readily if the whole of the branch system is left intact. On the other hand, the shrub must remain firm, and with some types of growth shortening the top will reduce wind rocking. Water loss, especially from evergreens, could be reduced by shortening the top growth. Perhaps the best compromise is to stake the shrub securely if it is likely to suffer from rocking and to wrap it round with polythene sheet — leaving the top open.

Watering should be carried out in spring and summer when soil conditions demand it. But water at the roots is no substitute for precautions against evaporation from the leaves at a time when the roots are not active enough to replace it.

There is a considerable body of experience concerning the transplanting of large trees. Some years ago several large fruit growers in the West Midlands transplanted apple trees 20 or more years old. These were usually trees which had been planted as temporary fillers with the

idea that they would be removed and scrapped when the main trees required the whole space. Instead of scrapping them they were lifted by tractor with no preliminary digging and moved to a new site. Success was greatest where the top growth was retained intact for a year after the move.

In present-day amenity horticulture, semi-mature and indeed quite large trees are often planted where instant effect is required. This is an expensive operation and one sometimes wonders whether the expense is justified.

An early pioneer in this field in the late 17th century was the famous landscape architect and gardener Le Notre. He laid out huge gardens,

including the most famous one for Louis XIV at Versailles. He would sometimes transplant whole woodlands of quite mature trees.

In the 19th century a certain Mr Barron designed a transplanting machine for large trees. It was operated and drawn by a steam traction engine. The machine consisted of a large pole on a four-wheel trailer. The pole was anchored in such a way that it could be moved from vertical to horizontal positions. A large hole was dug around the tree and the pole was lashed to the trunk in the vertical position. It was then tipped over until a position near the horizontal was reached and the roots were clear of the ground. The tree was then drawn to its new site.

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