

Forest Facts

Oaks in Your Yard

The majestic Coast Live Oak that we enjoy in Carmel is an integral part of the landscape. Since this is a native species, it is well-adapted to our climate, soil and geographic environment. Native oaks, when young, are very adaptable and fairly quick growing, making them excellent landscape assets.

The Coast Live Oak is a hardy tree that provides beauty, shade and is essential to many species of birds and animals. Oaks increase property value — a single mature tree can add thousands of dollars to the value of a homesite. Under ideal conditions, oaks should live for hundreds of years.

While oaks are hardy, mature trees cannot tolerate many changes. They are sometimes subjected to stress which could endanger their lives. Three items to consider are:

1. Watering

Once established, native live oaks need little or no irrigation to survive, since they are adapted to this climate, but they may benefit from some watering and fertilizing. Do not over-water. Damage due to over watering may not appear immediately, but will hasten the demise of your prized tree.

When watering, (and it is best to water in the fall or winter), keep water at least four feet from the trunk of an oak. Moist, warm soil near the base of a native oak promotes crown and root rot. Water on the outer edge of the root-feeding zone, which is beneath the tips of the outer branches. Irrigation should be by the “deep watering method” only once or twice a season. Frequent, shallow watering not only encourages root rot, it also results in ineffective, shallow roots near the surface, a needless waste of the tree’s energy. When watering, you can use a soaker hose, or deep water with a probe attached to your hose.

A good mulch three to four inches deep out to the drip line (outer tips of branches) is helpful in retaining moisture and eliminating competing plants. Avoid raking within the root zone of trees.

Fertilizing can be helpful. For large trees, it is best to apply fertilizer in holes spaced two feet apart — out at the drip line.

2. Grading

Changing the soil surface around the base of an oak can be detrimental to its health. Filling or grading soil away from trees results in injury to the roots since nearly all of the lateral root system occurs within the top three feet of soil. Also, this leaves only the poorest soil in which trees cannot be expected to do well.

If fill is necessary, the common practice is to leave a pit around the trunk of the tree. Wall up to the rim of this pit with rock or brick to allow air to reach the trunk and crown of the tree. Since heavy fills may kill the tree despite this precaution, avoid fills whenever possible. Grading the soil away from the oak tree is especially detrimental to the roots since it destroys the trees’ power to gain nutrients and moisture essential for growth.

3. Planting Near Oaks

Planting lawns, flowers, ivy, ferns or shrubs, which require extensive watering around the base of oaks, can be detrimental to the trees in that the roots could get waterlogged and rot. Only drought-resistant plants that require no summer watering should be selected.

There are a number of plants, some of which are native to California, that can be grown beneath oaks. For an extensive listing of compatible natives to plant around oaks, contact the city forester.