



Plant Trees with Care near Utility Lines

by Michelle Le Strange, Master Gardener

How big does it get? This should be the first question one asks when deciding what tree to plant. Because tree size does matter, when planting where space is limited such as near power lines, in narrow side yards, or close to buildings. In these cases it should be obvious: plant small trees. Trees that reach a mature height of less than 25 feet are considered small trees.

Selecting the right tree for the right place in the landscape is an important decision. Yet, drive around town and it won't take long before you see a row of large trees planted directly under power lines. Their massive trunks often look out of place because their tree canopies have been topped off so that their branches don't touch the lines.

Power companies are required by law to prune and sometimes remove tall trees that grow into or threaten electric power lines. It is a matter of public safety and preventing power outages.

Planting trees under utility lines can pose a hazard to humans by electrical shock and to personal property from fires. In California one of the leading causes of power outages is tree interference.

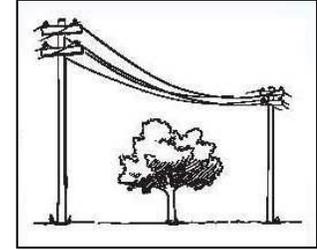
Utility service is delivered to our homes by overhead or underground distribution systems. Overhead lines can be electrical, telephone, cable or television. Underground lines can also include services such as water, sewer, and natural gas. These vital systems necessitate the proper selection of tree species and planting site.

As homeowners it is our responsibility to make smart choices, when it comes to tree selection and planting on our property. However, just the other day I noticed a new planting of three coastal redwoods directly under a 20 foot tall power line. Certainly everyone know that redwoods grow tall! How will those trees look a few years from now, when their tops are mowed off?

There are many places to get good information: tree and plant nurseries, gardening books, local cities, and even power companies have tree lists. The Master Gardeners recently completed a useful Ornamental Tree Selection & Guide for Home Gardens and Landscapes that is available on line: http://ucanr.org/sites/UC_Master_Gardeners/files/23464.pdf. One should always ask before they plant, not after.

To aid in identifying tree placement, divide your landscape into three areas where you can plant trees: the tall zone, the medium zone and the short zone, and choose trees accordingly.

Planting big trees under utility lines eventually leads to annual pruning, which leads to an unnatural shape, structural weakness, and greater stress which increases susceptibility to disease and insect invasion. As you drive around town this winter, start counting the dead trees associated with this kind of pruning.



Plant short trees under utility lines

Homeowners should not attempt to prune trees near power lines. Call a certified utility tree worker or your local utility company. High-voltage lines are not usually insulated, and direct contact will result in electric shock. Children should be warned never to climb trees near powerlines.

Before you start digging holes be sure to locate where underground utilities are located. If necessary request an Underground Service Alert (USA) by calling 811 two days before digging. This simple and free service ensures safety for the excavator and homeowner and prevents damage to underground utilities.

So, remember to look up and down prior to selecting and planting trees on your property.



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