



TREE NOTES

CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF FORESTRY AND FIRE PROTECTION

Pete Wilson
Governor
State of California

Richard A. Wiion
Director

Douglas Wheeler
Secretary for Resources
The Resources Agency



NUMBER: 1

APRIL 1989

Protecting Trees From Construction Impacts

Sherburn R. Sanborn

Forester, CDF Resource Management, P.O. Box 670, Santa Rosa, CA 95402-0670

Why Should We Protect Trees

An important benefit of trees to society is their aesthetic value. Our parks, streets, homes and businesses would seem sterile without them. Trees also have monetary value. Residential and commercial properties with established trees have a greater market value than those without them. Trees provide other benefits which include: shade, noise abatement, wind breaks, erosion control and air pollution reduction. Like all green plants, trees convert carbon dioxide into oxygen during photosynthesis. This process contributes significantly to the recycling of the atmospheric gases we breathe. Unfortunately trees are often irreversibly damaged or killed during construction and/or landscaping.

Understanding a Tree's Root System

The primary impact of construction around a tree is to the unseen portion, the root system. Activities which disturb or alter the soil in which roots grow can injure or kill a tree. To reduce or prevent adverse impacts, we must understand how roots function and how they develop in the soil.

The greatest proportion (90%) of tree roots is found within the first three feet of soil. Roots function to support and anchor the tree. In addition, specialized (absorbing) roots function to exchange gases and to absorb water and minerals. Most absorbing roots are found in the first 8-12 inches of soil where water and oxygen can readily penetrate. Roots require both water and oxygen to grow and function. A network of supporting roots and absorbing roots grows well beyond the trunk. Depending on soil conditions they may extend two to three times the radius of the crown.

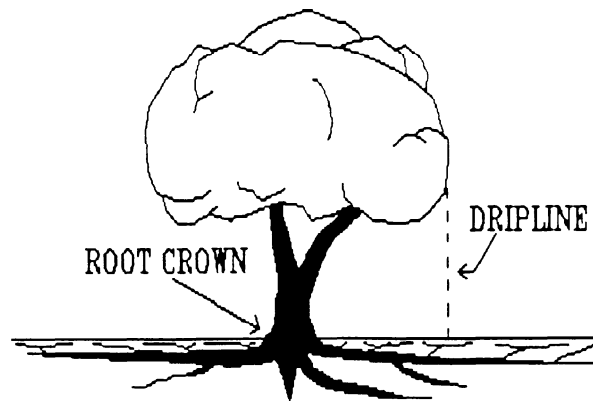
The roots of most tree species are associated with beneficial fungi called mycorrhizae. These fungi increase the roots ability to absorb water and minerals

Soil disturbance during construction can permanently disrupt this association.

How Construction Affects Roots

By understanding where roots grow and how they function, we can begin to see how construction activities such as trenching, slope cuts, soil compaction, soil grade changes and paving can affect roots.

When trenching for utilities and foundations or where grade lowering is done close to a tree, there is a likelihood that roots will be cut. The closer the trench is to the trunk the greater the damage. Each root that is cut reduces the tree's capacity to supply water and nutrients to the leaves. Trenching within just a few feet of a trunk can reduce the functional root system by as much as 50%.



Soil is compacted during construction by heavy equipment which squeezes out the air spaces making it more dense and stable. Unfortunately, this process greatly reduces the infiltration of water and oxygen into the soil. As a result roots cease to function and eventually die. In addition, root penetration is decreased.

Soil grade changes alter the natural soil level around a tree. The addition of fill soil in particular, can have an effect similar to soil compaction. The depth and porosity of the fill soil are the most important factors affecting the tree. If the depth is significant or the porosity is low, root death can occur. For some tree species, a grade change of two inches can be significant. Soil fill that is compacted or has lower porosity than the native soil will restrict root activity. If roots cannot develop or grow into the fill, recovery by the tree after construction may be impaired or prevented.

