

A Hill & Sons, Nurserymen, supply direct to the public from: Station Nurseries, Station Road, Stokesley, nr Middlesborough, Cleveland TS9 7AB; 01642 711281; www.hillandsons.co.uk

• Suppliers of Air-Pots: The Caledonian Tree Company, Cowbraehill, Tynehead, Pathhead, Midlothian EH37 5XT; 01875 835360; www.superoots.com. Minimum-order quantities apply; please enquire for details



ILLUSTRATION: CATH READ

Root to the future



TIM SANDALL

LIN HAWTHORNE is Head Gardener of a private estate in North Yorks

THOUGH BY INCLINATION an impulse buyer of plants, necessity dictates otherwise. This is especially true of trees and most shrubs, which establish better if planted when dormant, balled and burlapped if possible, bare-root if not. Much of my planting is done in areas far from ready access to water, so autumn and winter setting out makes the most of winter rains when plants are producing new root growth. For the best-quality results this means planning and ordering well in advance of planting.

I plant potted specimens too, of course, most acquired

by mail order, which demands a degree of trust. I need to be sure that pots are full of roots but never potbound. Once roots hit the pot sides, they inevitably begin spiralling, which quickly becomes a habit that they are loath to break. The great storm of 1987 flattened many mature trees with spiralled root plates unequal to adequate anchorage, a lesson that Colin Crosbie (Superintendent of the Woody Ornamental Department at RHS Garden Wisley) took to heart. I recently witnessed his confidently brutal root pruning of pot-bound specimens before planting, during which every vestige of spirally inclined root was ruthlessly discarded. Not for the faint hearted. But each cut root then produces fine new roots that grow away afresh.

In bare-root trees, fine feeder roots are sparse; it takes a full winter to make up the deficiency before they can sustain good top growth. Root-balled trees fare better: 'undercutting' in the nursery ensures a fair density and distribution of feeder roots. But trees must be planted pronto to protect fine roots from desiccation.

There must be a better way, and indeed there is. In his family nursery at Stokesley in Cleveland, David Hill showed me a technique that may revolutionise nursery production (and my planting schedules). As yet this is the only nursery in the North of England to use Air-Pots, with the landscaping industry its main customer base at present. Air-Pot containers are made of recycled plastic moulded into inward- and outward-facing cones, rather like an egg box. Inward-facing cones guide the roots into outward-facing ones, which are perforated at the tips. As roots approach the outer surface, their tips dry out. The effect is of continual pinch-pruning by desiccation, thus inducing a mass of fine new feeder roots, which occur back to the base of the stem, resulting in an incredibly dense root ball with no spiralling. Establishment is rapid and excellent. Moreover, the technique should have great benefits for plants such as magnolias and caryas that resent root disturbance on planting.

The Air-Pot is the brainchild of Jamie Single, an Australian horticulturist now working in Edinburgh, supplying the horticultural industry worldwide – pioneers of air roots from Oz to us. 🌱