

Do the white thing , By Ursula Buchan, The Guardian 2003.

I have a collection of six fine trees in the garden. Though not exactly an arboretum, I get pleasure from them nevertheless. The trouble is that they grow very slowly and are rather prone to windblow - but I recently found out why this is.

Standard trees (that is, those with a clear stem up to about six feet high) like these, which are sold in garden centres in black pots, often sit in those pots for more than a few months, especially if the tree is unusual and hard to shift. When this happens the roots "girdle" or spiral round the inside of the pot and, after a season, will also be subject to "secondary thickening" (as are stems). Put such a beast in the soil and it will probably not prosper, for the roots will find it difficult to spread out into the surrounding earth. Take away the stake and the tree may blow over.

It wasn't until I met Mike Glover, sales director of Barcham Trees, an enormous wholesale tree nursery near Ely, that I discovered a beautifully, magnificently simple answer to the problem of root girdling in trees: white pots instead of black.

For more than 10 years this supplier of standard, semi-mature and multi-stemmed trees - up to a massive 12in (around 30cm) in trunk diameter - to local authorities and landscape architects has been growing saplings in permeable white pots up to 1,000 litres in capacity.

Glover had been converted to the idea of white pots while still a student at Writtle by an Australian nurseryman who had discovered that roots growing in them scorched much less in hot weather. This is because they grow away from rather than towards the pot sides, and also vertically down. (Those who remember biology lessons will know that roots are phototropic and geotropic: that is, they grow away from the light and downwards.)

When Glover started working at Barcham he discovered that the company was also trying these pots out, having talked to the same Australian. The results were so encouraging that, 10 years ago, the nursery turned completely to white pots. What is more, experimentation (Glover thinks as hard about tree roots as Arsene Wenger does about team selection) proved that polyweave pots - which let a certain amount of air in - promoted even better, more fibrous root growth, since roots must have oxygen to thrive.

So why can't you buy a 6ft tree in your local garden centre in a white, flexible pot? Glover believes it is because most production is mechanised and geared up for rigid pots. However, Warren Chatfield, production director of Barcham's, has designed a potting machine that can put 700 large trees a day into flexible pots. It is known as the Wallace and Gromit for the eccentricities of its design, but it does work.

The proof of Barcham Trees' approach is in the planting. Not one of the 100 sweet chestnuts planted to form the Jubilee Avenue in Hyde Park has died, nor yet any of the many that have been sold for use on BBC's Ground Force. Unfortunately, although the nursery now has five distributors around the country its stock is unlikely to penetrate the retail market very far since the trees are too tall to take home in a car. On the other hand, it has been awarded a Royal Warrant this year, so the Queen has plainly put her faith in white pots. I just wish a lot of other people would, too.