

We all want wildlife to inhabit our project sites, just not right away! Unfortunately tender, young plant material is tastier than the old stuff. Another common hindrance to plant establishment is overzealous maintenance. Here are some measures that help give newly installed plants a fighting chance.

Tree shelters/Tree tubes/Plant protectors

There are a myriad of products out there to help protect plants during the establishment phase. Most plant protectors are plastic tubes, either solid or mesh, held in place with bamboo or wood stakes. Sound Native Plants uses the solid, blue plant protectors most often, because they are packed flat in sheets, which reduces shipping costs and facilitates hauling on remote sites. Each sheet creates a 4" diameter tube. One sheet is usually sufficient for a 1-gallon deciduous tree or compact shrub. Two sheets can be linked together to make larger tubes for bushier plants. We assemble the sheets into tubes on site, before installing them (it is very difficult to assemble the tubes around a plant). Exercise care while placing the assembled tube over the plant. We find it most efficient to pound stakes or bamboo in first, with the stake about 2–3" away from the plant. Then slip the tube over the plant, push the shelter down so it is fully in contact with the ground, and attach the tube to the stake tightly, using at least two zip ties per stake. Use two stakes per plant protector on sites exposed to high winds or flooding, and on protectors made from two sheets.

We prefer the solid walled tubes for most sites, because they create a mini greenhouse effect, increasing temperatures in the spring and fall and improving moisture retention during our dry summers. Open mesh tubes provide more air circulation, so they work better for especially hot planting sites, where the solid-wall tubes may overheat the newly installed plants. The blue plant protectors also help during maintenance activities. The bright color allows crews to spot each and every plant, and the walls of the protector shield the plant during weed whacking and herbicide application.

Tree tubes effectively prevent rabbit and small rodent browse, but they are less effective on deer. The tubes come in various heights, and taller tree tubes will prevent deer browse longer, but the deer may eat the tops off as soon as the plants outgrow their tubes. Over time, plants will outgrow the plant protectors and they can begin to cause more harm than good, suppressing growth and girdling stems. We recommend removing protectors and reusing them. Biodegradable tubes have been developed in the UK and Australia, but they are not widely available here, and we have not tried them.

If predation from burrowing rodents is a major concern, the bottom of the tubes can be buried a few inches below ground to prevent rodents from digging underneath the protector. We usually find careful installation that insures there are no gaps between the bottom of the tube and the ground is sufficient. Rodents can get inside the tubes if motivated to do so, but overall the tubes look less like plants and predation should be reduced.

Tree tubes can limit the outward spread of shrubs with wide, dense growth habits, and these shrubs have good natural defenses against mechanical damage from mowing and weed whacking, so the need for tubes may be lower. Tree tubes may still benefit these species by encouraging root development, although aboveground growth may be somewhat reduced.

Tree cages

In situations with extreme pressure from browse, sometimes we install protectors assembled from metal hardware cloth or heavy-duty plastic fencing. These protectors are more expensive than pre-manufactured tubes, but they are highly durable and may be reused multiple times. For information on preventing beaver damage, check our website for the information sheet entitled 'What To Do About Beavers'.