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Grafted Plants

A plant that is grafted may require special care. Here is some basic information about grafting and caring for a grafted plant.

What is Grafting?

Grafting is a form of plant production that involves joining two or more plants together so that they function as one plant. Grafting involves a rootstock (or understory) and one or more scions (the parts added to the plant with roots). Grafting is an art and a science, normally time consuming and labor intensive.

Why Graft Plants?

The most common reasons plants are grafted are to obtain a specific ornamental appearance, to asexually propagate a plant, to confer disease resistance, and to improve garden performance of a plant. Most weeping-form plants are grafted (e.g. weeping cherry). The roots and trunk are from a non-weeping plant to which the weeping branches are grafted. Many hybrids or varieties are propagated via grafting since a genetic clone is desired (e.g. hybrid witch hazel or hybrid flowering dogwood). In fruit crops it is common to use rootstocks resistant to specific soil borne pathogens paired with scions selected for superior fruit set. Some flowering or fruiting plants that have male and female flowers on separate plants may be grafted together so that pollination may occur (e.g. winterberry holly or blue holly).

Caring for a Grafted Plant

In many cases it is difficult to tell if a plant has been grafted. It is also possible that grafted plants may not need any special care. The important thing to be aware of is that the growth of the rootstock or understory does not overtake that of the scion(s). Here are two examples of how that might appear:

Weeping cherry: All branches on a weeping cherry should emerge from a scion. Watch out for branches growing from the rootstock or understory, which is any point below the top graft union. The branches from the rootstock or understory will typically grow into a large upright tree form if allowed to remain. Within a relatively short period of time the weeping form of the tree will be lost, replaced by a large cherry tree.

Hybrid witch hazel: The graft on a hybrid witch hazel is usually very low and close to the ground. Watch out for shoots that emerge from the rootstock below the graft union. Given time these shoots may overtake the scion, resulting in a shrub that is less showy and very different from the intended appearance.

If you have questions about caring for a grafted plant don't hesitate to ask us. We can show you how to identify the graft union and alert you if the plant you have is susceptible to being overgrown by the rootstock or understory.

Sources: Compiled from experience and information from the Pennsylvania Certified Horticulturist Reference Guide. For more information visit us on the web at www.behmerwald.com