

TREE GUARDS AND PROTECTION

Introduction

Trees may be damaged by livestock, rabbits, hares, voles, people (often accidentally) and the weather.

The simplest way to keep livestock at bay is obviously to fence off any newly planted areas with appropriate stock fencing.

Newly planted areas can also be rabbit-fenced. This is not always foolproof, as rabbits can find their way in or, indeed, find themselves fenced inside the area. The bottom of the rabbit-fencing should be buried beneath the ground or bent back to prevent rabbits burrowing through. Remember that any gates must also be made rabbit-proof. Rabbit fencing is a fairly labour intensive and physically demanding process.

Guards are an alternative way to protect from rabbits, hares, voles and people.

Types of individual tree protection

- a) guards : these are tubes of approximately 100 mm diameter and 60 cm height; they often come with two ties to attach them to a stake. They may be solid or mesh.
- b) spiral guards : these are narrow spirals of plastic, really designed to protect trees of a 10 mm diameter or more, so that the spiral can merely be wound round the fairly sturdy trunk. However, some companies recommend them for putting round young trees and being supported by a cane.
- c) quills : very narrow solid tubes which are designed to be used without a stake

Which guards to choose

Solid guards (sometimes called 'shelters') of any dimensions (including quills) are generally best avoided as they encourage fast, spindly growth in their snug artificial microclimate and this growth may be severely set back when the 'real world' is encountered. The tree may never develop to a good form after this poor start.

Spiral guards are not recommended in Orkney as, in strong winds, they tend to get blown over, dragging the young tree with them and causing physical damage. In addition, they provide a narrow, dark growing environment, from which the trees are likely to emerge as spindly, weak plants. They may also inhibit the desirable development of side shoots.

Robust mesh / net guards appear to give the best results. Research has shown that trees put on girth in response to moving in the wind and these guards allow this to happen. The slight wind-filtering effect provided by these guards is probably the least important factor in deciding whether to use them; if a tree can't develop without a guard, then it's probably being planted on a site that is too exposed.

Guards with a curved top 'lip' are good in our very windy conditions where a young tree may be damaged by being blown against a harsh top edge.

Advantages and Disadvantages of using mesh / net tree guards

Advantages

- they can protect trees from rabbits, hares and voles
- they can protect small trees from accidental damage by people, eg in school grounds
- they can enable small trees to be found amidst a field of long grass - useful for maintenance checks
- they can be easily seen by anyone mowing or strimming nearby, so accidental damage is avoided
- they can prevent young trees being smothered when long grass collapses over them in late summer.

Disadvantages

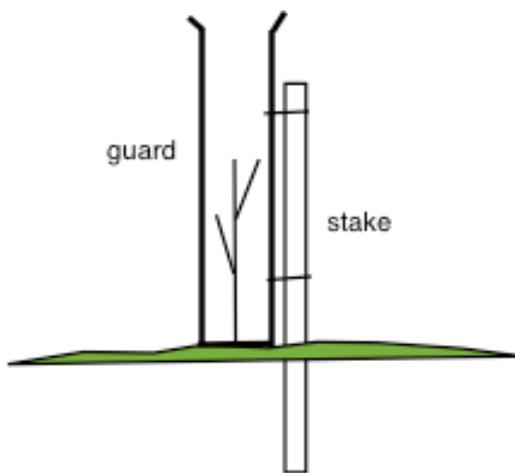
- they have become very expensive; the guard and its supporting stake can cost two or three times the cost of the tree
- multi-branched trees like birch and alder often grow out through the mesh and it can therefore sometimes become necessary to cut the guards off the trees, or make larger holes where the branches emerge.

Removal of guards

Once trees are growing out of the tops of the guards and appear vigorous and sturdy, the treeguards can be removed. It may be easiest and kindest to the tree to remove them in spring just before the trees leaf up.

Any guards which can be removed reasonably intact can of course be reused.

How to install guards



The stake (which goes on the outside of the guard) should be hammered in to finish a few centimetres below the top of the guard so that it doesn't damage an emerging tree in a gale. Each guard should be fixed firmly to a stake with two cable ties.

If you are using mulch mats, put them on before installing the guards

NB The trees themselves should not be staked.

Conclusions

Consider carefully whether you really need to use guards. If you are not infested by rabbits / hares, then the trees may well develop perfectly well without guards and you will save yourself considerable time and money.

Ask around for any secondhand guards that may be available. Even when they have been cut to remove them from trees, they may still be effective if the ties are positioned to hold any gaps together.