

Lawn Under a Mature Tree: Checklist

Six steps, three checks first, and when mulch is the answer

Three checks before you order anything

1 Look for surface roots

If a rake catches on them, root competition is your dominant constraint, not shade.

2 Probe the soil depth in five places

Push a screwdriver in. If it stops after a couple of centimetres there is very little to work with.

3 Watch the light across a whole day

Mid morning, midday and late afternoon. Dappled light moving through the day is a different situation from constant deep shade.

4 Call your municipality about the tree

Rules on protected trees and root zone disturbance vary and are revised. Confirm what applies to your address before anyone brings a spade.

Preparing without harming the tree

1 Take old growth off shallowly

Remove thin grass and thatch without digging into the root plate. This is not the place for a rotovator.

2 Work around large roots rather than through them

Sod laid over a proud root will dry along that line. That is a cosmetic cost worth paying.

3 Add only a thin dressing of quality soil

Enough for the sod to knit into. If you need real depth to level the ground, change the plan instead.

4 Relieve compaction by hand

Hand forking rather than machinery over a root plate.

5 Rake to a fine even surface

Contact between sod and soil is what lets it root, and it matters more here than anywhere else in the garden.

After it is down

1 Keep seams tight and staggered

Gaps let light to the soil, which is where weeds start.

2 Water more than you would on open lawn

The tree is drinking from the same soil and the canopy keeps light rain off the ground.

3 Lift a corner after a week

Damp underside and pale roots reaching down means it is working. A dry underside means water more.

4 Mow high in that area all season

Every extra centimetre of leaf catches more of what little light there is.

5 Know when to switch to mulch

If you have relaid the same patch twice, a mulch ring under the canopy is cheaper over time and better for the tree.

Not sure the spot is worth sodding? Ask us to look first.

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