

FIELD PERSPECTIVE

The aftercare window: where plantation survival is decided

Plantation survival depends heavily on what happens in the eighteen to twenty-four months after planting. Public audit data and restoration research point to the same critical window.

The Arborist Team 6 min read

Plantation drives produce two numbers that can sit very far apart. The first is the count of saplings planted, reported soon after the event. The second is the count of trees alive several years later. The gap between them is influenced by what happens in the months immediately after planting.

Several recent sources have looked at this directly. A 2024 performance audit by the Comptroller and Auditor General of Odisha's CAMPA operations found plantation survival as low as 7.5% at certain sites between 2016–17 and 2019–20, citing limited maintenance after planting as a factor. A 2025 national review of CAMPA performance found state-level survival rates ranging from around 40% to over 90%, with variation linked in part to differences in aftercare practice. Restoration research on tropical and sub-tropical Asian forests has reported average mortality of 18% in the first year, rising to roughly 44% by year five.

Species selection and weather both influence survival. The data above points to a third factor: the operational system that maintains saplings through the first dry season.

The structure of the aftercare window

Plantation budgets typically cover sapling procurement, site preparation, planting day, and initial protection. Aftercare activities — watering through the first dry season, weeding, replacement of mortalities, and ongoing protection from grazing — sit on a different cost line, and their organisational ownership varies by funding source.

In CSR-funded projects, aftercare is sometimes handled by an implementation partner under a defined contract, and sometimes not. In ULB drives, contractor mandates and the included monitoring period vary by tender. In CAMPA work, aftercare obligations are defined in the working plan but operational follow-through differs across forest divisions.

The result is that responsibility for aftercare can shift hands several times during the critical window, depending on the project structure.

What aftercare consists of

The actions that determine first-year survival are well understood and not technically complex. They include:

- Watering on a defined schedule during the first dry season.
- Basin maintenance and weeding around each sapling.
- Replacement of mortalities within the planting season, before saplings are no longer available.
- Protection from grazing — tree guards, fencing — with periodic checks and re-protection.
- Structural support for taller saplings against wind in exposed sites.

None of these require advanced training. Each requires scheduled execution with verification that the action occurred.

Why the window is hard to monitor

A stressed sapling in month three can look similar to a healthy one. By month nine, distinguishing the two is straightforward, but much of the underlying damage by that point is no longer reversible.

Standard reporting cycles compound this. Planting figures are typically reported within weeks. CSR and ESG cycles operate annually. Survival assessments, where commissioned, are often scheduled at year two or year three. The information needed to intervene effectively sits earlier than these cycles routinely cover.

The actions that determine plantation survival happen in the months immediately after planting. The standard cycles that audit them happen one to two years later.

What a more instrumented plantation includes

Several elements, taken together, narrow the gap between planted and surviving saplings:

- **Tree-level records from planting day.** Each sapling geolocated, with a stable identifier such as a QR plate or RFID tag, so that activity against the sapling can be logged over time.
- **Scheduled aftercare with verification.** Recurring tasks assigned to a named responsible party, with a verifiable check that the task occurred — a photograph, a mobile log, a sample inspection.
- **Monthly mortality tracking.** Replacement happening within the planting season, while suitable stock is still available.

The cost of these elements has fallen with the maturity of mobile inspection apps, low-cost identifiers, and remote-sensing-based survival checks.

The procurement lever

Plantation contracts that link payment partly to milestone-based survival, verified by a third party, distribute incentive across the aftercare window rather than concentrating it on the planting event. Some state forest departments have begun adopting this approach in CAMPA work. The same structure can be specified in CSR contracts and ULB tenders.

The technical capability to verify survival at scale is available at price points that fit municipal and CSR budgets. The leverage is in how the contract is written.

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