

Fall is Tree Time

Article by Jake Bays, Rockwall County Extension Master Gardener

If you're reading this article, you're either my mom—or you really love plants. I love plants too. Caring for gardens and trees is a big part of my life, and I can thank my mom for instilling that love of nature.

Fall is here. The mums are blooming, the pumpkins are on your porch, but don't forget about your trees! Most of us take them for granted. They give shade, beauty, and structure to our landscapes, but neglected trees can cause major problems. So let me share a few branches of knowledge for fall and winter tree care.

Fertilizer vs. “Weed and Feed”

“Weed and feed” products may be convenient for lawns, but they're bad for trees. The herbicides in them can stress or even kill trees, leading to leaf discoloration, stunted growth, and decline. On the other hand, fall *is* a great time to fertilize. Fertilizer encourages root growth and nutrient absorption, helping trees store energy for winter and bounce back strong in spring. Fall is also the perfect season to plant new trees, giving them time to establish deep roots before the first freeze.

Don't Forget to Water

Cooler weather doesn't mean soil is moist. If rainfall is scarce, give your trees a deep soak to help them through the dry months.

When to Prune

In Rockwall, the best time to prune trees is during the dormant season—generally November through early February. But timing matters:

- Avoid pruning *oaks* between February and June to prevent the spread of oak wilt.
- Avoid pruning *elms* between April and September to reduce the risk of Dutch elm disease.

Both diseases are devastating fungal infections spread by spores and beetles. When pruning is necessary, seal wounds to reduce infestation and disease transmission.

Think Twice About Bradford Pears

Bradford (Callery) pear trees may look charming in bloom, but they're structurally weak. Their branches split easily during ice, snow, or high winds, often breaking onto homes or cars. Consider replacing them with stronger, longer-lived native or adapted trees.

Jake's Tree Recommendations for Rockwall, Texas

- **Shumard Red Oak** – Up to 60 ft tall, brilliant red fall foliage, drops leaves in winter.
- **Chinese Pistache** – Fast-growing, 40 ft tall, fiery red fall color.
- **Autumn Blaze Maple** – Reaches 60 ft, with outstanding fall color.
- **Live Oak** – Slow-growing native, broad canopy, holds its leaves year-round.
- **Crape Myrtle & Vitex** – Not native, but well-adapted, beautiful landscape additions.
- **Shantung Maples** – From small “Baby Dragon” to medium “Fire Dragon” or “Super Dragon,” these are excellent alternatives to Japanese maples. Heat- and clay-soil-tolerant, and a certified Texas Superstar plant.

For more plant ideas well-suited to North Texas, visit: texassuperstar.com.

In Conclusion

In the words of Bob Ross: *“You know me, I think there ought to be a big old tree right there. And let's give him a friend. Everybody needs a friend.”*

I hope you'll fill your yards with plants, trees, and plenty of friends. Get outside and get dirty!

Jake Bays – is a Rockwall County Extension Master Gardener. Specializing in regenerative agriculture and soil health to grow strong, disease-resistant plants.