

Ornamental Trees for Your Landscape

by Joyce Friels, Bell County Master Gardener

Last week, on one of those nice warm days that we experience during winter time in Central Texas, I took a walk through our yard inspecting the perennial flower beds. On my trek through the front and back areas I decided a couple of places could use some improvement, but what could I plant that would make the areas stand out and add interest to the space. I picked up some of my many garden magazines to get some ideas. I noticed that most every garden pictured had one or more ornamental trees. Some pictures showed trees planted under taller trees. This seemed to give a new look to the space and added fullness. This type of planting is called under story planting. Other types of ornamental trees were used as focal points in an existing bed surrounded by perennial plants. Some smaller trees were planted by themselves to add interest and to draw you into the yard or entry way of the house. I decided to do some research on ornamental trees by surfing the net and perusing the garden and landscaping books at the local bookstores.

What I found was dozens of varieties, shapes, and sizes of small trees that could be used in a number of ways in any landscape. Some varieties are listed as small ornamental trees and some varieties are listed as shrubs that can be pruned and shaped into small trees. An ornamental tree is described as a tree that grows from six to forty feet in height, that has flowering blooms, colorful fruit, or has interesting form and foliage. They can be single trunked or multi-trunked. They can be deciduous, semi-evergreen or evergreen. A deciduous plant is one that loses its leaves in the fall. An evergreen is one that keeps its leaves or foliage all year. The foliage on many varieties change during the cooler days of fall giving us colors ranging from yellow to maroon and all the shades in between. I also discovered that we have a wide variety of ornamental trees growing in Central Texas that are native to this area.

If you would like to have one or two ornamental trees in your yard, the first thing you should do is read up on the varieties, sizes, and growing conditions; decide what color and shape you want to add to the space; then visit the area nurseries or garden centers. It is a wise choice to go to a nursery that specializes in native plants and trees. It is usually better to use native plants in the landscape or to use plants that have been adapted to the growing conditions found in Central Texas.

The first ornamental tree that one usually thinks of planting is the Redbud. It makes a great splash of color before anything else blooms in the early spring. And of course, the 'adapted' Crape Myrtle should not be left out, with its peeling bark, beautiful blooms and fall foliage; however, I feel both of these specimens could be replaced in Central Texas landscapes by some native species that would give the same look and feel to the landscape.

Some ornamental trees that could be planted in our landscapes are: the native Scarlet Buckeye (or Red Buckeye) is a deciduous ornamental tree growing from 15-30 feet that does best in well-prepared soil with filtered morning sun and afternoon shade; also native, the Texas Buckeye likes morning sun with afternoon shade showing off its upright form and large compound leaves. The Possumhaw Holly is a small Texas native deciduous tree with shiny dark green leaves and very showy red berries. Another small native is the Texas Kidneywood that grows eight to fifteen feet in height and has fragrant white to pale yellow flowers in the summer. The Mexican Elder is mostly evergreen and grows ten to fifteen feet tall with clusters of flowers that are visible in early summer and in fall. Another one is the Rusty Blackhaw Viburnum. It is a deciduous tree for sun or shade and a good choice for formal landscape projects as well as natural settings. It is easy to grow as a single trunk or multi-trunks, is maintenance-free, is a native and shows off brilliant color in the fall. One tree that should be considered is the Chaste tree sometimes referred to as Vitex. It is a tough deciduous small tree with aromatic leaves and showy lavender-blue or white flowers that attracts butterflies.

After you have done your homework on ornamental trees and decided which tree you want for a particular spot in your yard, it is time to go shopping. Always remember to read labels and ask questions so that you can be sure it is the same tree that you looked up in the books. You will need the common name, the botanical name, the size, spread width, and growing conditions. It is best to find exactly what you are looking for before making a purchase that could be the wrong one for your space and growing requirements.

So, with all the choices that are available, this may be the time to add an ornamental tree to your landscape. They can be successfully planted any time if proper procedures are followed. Plan to visit as many nurseries as you can before selecting the tree of your choice. Follow planting instructions and as the tree grows it will give you the look for your yard that was needed. Once these trees are established they will be easy to maintain.