

Trees for Texas

by Deborah Martin, Bell County Master Gardener

Trees may be our biggest bargain for environmental improvement. No matter what the condition of a home or building, well-placed and carefully selected trees can make the entire environment more attractive. Few structures are acceptable in the landscape without trees. Furthermore, an environment that is good for the culture of trees has also proved to be good for people. Communities where many good trees have been established and more are being planted demonstrate a feeling of continuity with the past and anticipation for the future. Properly selected, placed and cared for trees indicate a community or homeowner's pride in environment.

In addition to aesthetic reasons for having trees, some very practical ones include their climatic influences. Trees are sometimes referred to as nature's air conditioners. They moderate the climate by protecting from extremes in wind, heat, cold and drought. Trees also help to purify the air. Adequate numbers of them can considerably reduce smog, noise and other air-pollution problems that are damaging large areas of our country. Many birds and animals also depend upon trees for food and shelter. With the current power costs and possible future shortages, there is renewed interest in tree placement in the landscape for maximum contribution to the reduction of heat and glare inside the home.

If these reasons are not enough to encourage you to purchase some trees keep in mind that real estate professionals testify to the considerable increases in property value brought about by well-selected and attractively placed trees.

The diversity in soil and climate conditions in Texas makes it difficult to recommend a general list of trees for the entire state. The local County Extension agent or a good nurseryman can provide information about which species to plant in your area with your conditions. Your goal should be to plant effective tree species.

Texas homeowners should look for trees that will grow well in spite of temperature extremes, insect and disease attacks, widely varying moisture conditions, and varying soil type and quality. Resistance to damage caused by high winds is also an important factor in choosing tree species.

A common mistake made by many homeowners is planting the fastest-growing tree available. Most of these so-called "fast growers" have long-term serious faults such as being weak-wooded, surface-rooted, short-lived or unusually disease- and insect-susceptible. Most species of trees will respond to good care by growing at a relatively fast rate. The initial cost of a tree is so small in proportion to the value received over the years that a few extra dollars at purchase time for an improved variety or better species are well spent. For this reason it is usually better to select a tree that will grow at a moderate rate and produce a stronger and longer-lived specimen.

The selection of trees for the home landscape deserves careful consideration in terms of the soil type, availability of irrigation water and extremes in temperature. After analyzing the growing conditions, the homeowner should select trees that will be long-lived, strong-wooded and as insect and disease-resistant as possible, as well as of an ultimate size that will be appropriate in the overall landscape development.

Developing along with the surge of interest in ecology has been a renewed interest in native plants. It is logical to assume that the plants which are native to an area probably would require less maintenance since they have been growing there unattended for centuries. For example, our extensive native plant population provides many of our most highly regarded landscape trees, such as live oaks, shumard oaks, dogwood, redbud and pecans. However, with this abundance of native specimens, some people believe that they can dig trees themselves. But all too often, they may have only destroyed the trees or shrubs they have attempted to transplant because moving native trees from their natural environment requires special skills and equipment that the average homeowner does not have available. Before attempting to move an established tree or shrub, check with a local nursery, garden or center, or with an arborist. Digging a tree destroys up to 90%

of the root ball which makes for questionable survivability. Purchasing a container grown tree whose root ball will be transplanted with minimal damage is the better choice.

Transplanting trees has been radically simplified in recent years, primarily because of the trend toward containerized nursery stock. Most container-grown trees available in nurseries may be transplanted with ease 12 months out of the year if given proper care. Even large balled and burlapped trees frequently are moved with insignificant losses during the growing season by professional nurserymen.

Proper transplanting and post planting care usually make a significant difference in the growth rate of a tree. The second in this series of articles will talk about the how to of planting and after care and the third article in this series will list some trees recommended for our area of Texas. For additional factual information on these topics, contact your county Extension agent or local nurseryman.