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Best Trees for North Texas (Selection, Planting, and Maintenance)

Trees are wonderful things to have in a yard! This handout is all about the selection, planting, care and maintenance of shade and ornamental trees in your landscape. Above and beyond their beauty and aesthetic appeal, having several carefully selected and placed trees can provide you with the following benefits:

- A well placed shade tree can lower the roof and wall temperatures of your home by 20° or more in the summer; trees planted to reduce afternoon sun on your home can add up to significant savings on your summer electric bill! Plant deciduous trees for this purpose to take advantage of winter sun warming.
- Trees add significantly to the value of your home. When sold, homes with mature shade trees can command a slightly higher price and definitely sell faster than homes without mature trees.
- Anything green and growing around your home cleans the air of pollutants (dust, smog), and provides oxygen. A tree is just a great big air filter as far as the environment is concerned!
- Trees make great sound and wind barriers. If you have a neighbor who likes to play loud music or a busy street nearby, good-sized trees can muffle excessive noise and provide more privacy for your home. Plant trees on the north side of your home and property as a windbreak from severe cold - this will also lower your heating costs! Evergreen trees are better at doing this, but even deciduous trees still break the wind some.

General Tree Planting and Care

New Plantings: Observe the following points when planting your new tree. A properly planted tree can grow twice as fast and live twice as long as a poorly-transplanted tree. Follow these rules:

- **Dig a wide, shallow hole** - Dig a hole roughly twice as wide as the root ball for smaller trees, but make sure the floor of the hole is no deeper than the root ball itself. It's fine to dig a hole which is slightly too shallow since the root ball sticking up slightly over grade will not harm the tree long term, but sinking down below grade because of loose material or outright voids below the root ball will.
- **Check your roots** - Most trees are container grown these days, which is a simple way to transport them and no roots need to be cut to excavate the tree. This is a good thing, better in general than digging a tree out of the ground with the damage this involves to the root system, but containers can lead to their own issues. Make sure to cut excessive roots which are circling the edge of the container - a 1/2" to 1" depth of cut is fine, depending upon the size of the roots - down each quadrant line. Additionally, check the root flare of the tree when you install the plant. Carefully remove soil from the top of the root ball (don't unduly disturb lots of roots, but a few small roots are fine to remove) until you find the root flare of the tree, the point where the tree's trunk flares out. This should be your soil level when the tree's in-ground! Even plants in containers can be a bit too far down in the container, either from roots growing through mulch over the top of the ball as the tree's growing, to being poorly transplanted from smaller to larger container as it grew. Either way, be sure the root flare is exposed.

For balled-and-burlapped trees, remove any wire or nylon holding the burlap together, but leave the burlap itself on as you plant it. Take the burlap off the top of the root ball to check the root flare, just as

you did the container grown tree. The point of this exercise in all cases is to prevent later girdling of the roots, which can take a tree that's done well for several years and just "mysteriously" cause it to struggle, or fail. When the root flare is exposed, prune any roots that are encircling the trunk or threaten to as the tree grows older and the trunk expands.

- **Backfill carefully** – There are two schools of thought here. Some arborists recommend that you backfill with pure native soil only, as this is what the tree will have to grow in eventually - so to prevent a poor soil transition line that may impact your drainage and rooting, they'll use pure native soil. This is a good way to do it, but we prefer to amend the backfilled soil with expanded shale and compost, to get the trees off to their best start. If you amend your soil, you still need to use native soil, blended with the compost and shale to improve drainage a bit and feed your roots, as your backfill - never replace the soil outright with a softer or more easily worked soil, as this can cause serious problems! (Your planting hole won't drain properly, roots will circle and wrap, etc.). Water the soil in as you backfill to work air pockets out.
- **Apply mulch** - A 2" to 3" layer of mulch should be applied over the root system of your new tree, regardless of season. Make sure this mulch is not in direct contact with the trunk, but once you've gone a few inches away from the trunk itself, mulch thickly and keep grass from overgrowing the area.
- **Staking** - A young tree sometimes will not require staking, but if you have a tall tree and a small root ball, you'll need to stake the tree to keep it in place. Use T-posts put around the tree (not through the original root ball, stake to firm soil) with wire to the trunk to keep the tree upright. This wiring should not be pulled as tight as is possible, but simply firm. It's not meant to stop the tree from leaning at all, but to keep the tree from being knocked out of the ground by high winds. This wire should be carefully padded with a piece of old waterhose at any point it's wrapped around a part of the tree, and double the wire to spread the force out that the bark has to withstand. In a perfect world, trees would not be staked at all - it can put pressure on bark, and the tree grows trunk thickness more quickly when it's exposed to a certain amount of wind back and forth - but since we live in North Texas and we're pretty windy on occasion, stake your taller new trees. Check your wires on occasion to keep them firmly in place, but not so stretched as to damage your bark. It is better to have to tighten loose wires once in a while than to harm your tree.
- **Water** - Sprinkler systems are not useful for watering a new tree. Water newly planted trees with a hose. Water deeply the first two days after planting to settle the soil, and then begin a watering schedule as needed. The first summer, be diligent to water when necessary! Container grown trees are often oversized for the spread of their root systems to begin with, so frequent watering in the summer will be required until the tree establishes. In the spring, fall, and winter, be careful to not overwater. We have a useful watering schedule we recommend to our customers for whom we're planting trees, and we've included it with this handout. It's only a guideline - if you're in doubt whether your tree needs water, sink your finger down to the second knuckle in the soil. If it's moist, leave it alone - if it's cool to the touch but your finger is dry, it's time to water.
- **Wrap the bark** - Young trees of certain species (Shumard red oaks, maples, pears, willows, anything with a tender looking bark) should have their trunks wrapped for the first summer the plant's in ground, and possibly the second. Don't wrap the trunk tightly, and remove the wrap after temperatures start to break in the fall. This is simply to shade tender bark on the lower trunk from the brutality of our North Texas summer sun a bit until the tree's canopy can shade its own trunk properly.
- **Root stimulator** - Root stimulator should be applied every three to four weeks, and done at the time of planting as well. Either organic or conventional root stimulators are fine, whichever fits your maintenance program. Both are helpful when properly used.

New Trees - The First Summer

Careful, careful watering - It's technically possible to overwater in summer but in practice, it's not easy. Check it closely!

- **Inspect Trunks for Borers** - On susceptible species (maples, red oaks, etc.), check the bark monthly for sap or holes. If you see either, or beetle-like insects on the trunk, drench the tree with Bonide or ferti-lome Systemic Drench to prevent borer issues before they become serious. **This preventive step is acceptable to do at this time, even if borers are not found, to protect your tree and ensure it does not become infested!**

Established Trees - One Year Later

- **Staking** - Unless you have an overwhelming reason to not do so, remove all staking after the first full year. If your tree hasn't set in well in the ground by this time, something's usually wrong with how it was planted (generally having too much soil placed over the root zone). Your tree will do better with some play back and forth in the wind, and staking isn't ideal for the bark, so do take it off at this time.
- **Watering** – After being planted for a year, trees will still require some supplemental watering in the summer. Sprinklers don't usually water adequately so some hand watering with a hose will be needed, but your tree will not need to be watered nearly as often as the first summer.
- **Fertilization** - Don't neglect your tree's feeding! Well-fed trees grow two or more times faster than trees lacking proper nutrition. Fertilize your tree in March, May and September.
- **Add more mulch** - Make sure you're maintaining at least a 2" deep layer of mulch on your tree's root ball, and don't allow grass to grow into this area. Grass competes with your tree for water and nutrients!

Established Trees - Two Years + Out

- **Watering** - Unless we're in serious drought conditions, your tree will rarely need more watering than your lawn sprinklers are providing, and if you do not have sprinklers, not much more than nature provides. In drought conditions, deep-soak your trees on slow dribble from a water hose for anywhere from two to twenty-four hours (depending upon size of tree!) every week to four weeks (again, depending upon size of tree). Older, more established trees don't need to be watered as often as trees that have only been in ground a few years, but when you do water them, it takes a long time to soak the soil deeply enough to do real good. Move the hose end around every couple of hours under the canopy of the tree to properly water all parts of the root system. Well-established trees are very resilient!
- **Fertilization** - every March and September. If you're looking to push the fastest growth possible, feed in May as well. Once your trees have been in the ground a few years, twice a year is just fine normally.
- **Mulch** - Your tree still doesn't like grass all the way to the base of the trunk, but on older trees, the shade the tree throws usually kills the lawn, not vice-versa. Mulch is always a good thing, though!

Pruning Trees

When pruning trees, you should be pruning with a purpose - don't prune limbs during the winter just because you think you're supposed to, prune with a plan in mind for later on. Good reasons for pruning includes improving the shape of the plant (removing rubbing or tangled limbs, unneeded lower limbs, etc.), to remove dead or diseased limbs, or to raise or open the canopy on shade trees where you desire more light on the lawn. A few notes on pruning below:

- **Save major pruning for late winter** - Unless some circumstance demands you prune your tree at a different time (power line companies, cities, storms, etc.), it's always best to do major pruning when needful in late January or February. Minor shaping and pruning can be done when you have time, but if you think you really need to open a tree up some, winter's best to do this.

- **Early pruning prevents later sawing** - Remove potential rubbing branches, bad branch angles, and lower growth you want to open up while the branches are under an inch in diameter. The branches aren't going to change direction - what you see when the branch is 1/4"-1/2" in diameter is the angle the branch is going to keep, other than a little bit of sag due to weight when older. Judicious pruning of smaller branching early prevents a big job later with a saw! If you do have a large branch that must be removed, do a 3-step cut - undercut the branch about 1/3 of the way through, top cut the branch through slightly further away from the tree to take the main weight of the branch off, then clean-cut the stub of the limb just beyond the pruning collar. This pruning method stops the branch from breaking under the weight of your top cut, and peeling off a strip of bark as the weight of the branch peels down.
- **Pruning paint is of limited use** – There are exactly two reasons to use pruning paint in our area - to immediately paint cuts on oak trees if you're worried about Oak Wilt disease in your neighborhood (we're not, normally, it's present in Dallas now but still quite rare), or to cover large, open areas of wood where big patches of bark have been lost due to mechanical damage or lightning strike. LARGE open areas, you're looking to prevent serious weathering and insect damage to the wood which can cause structural problems later. Otherwise, pruning paints are black, tarry sealants that get insanely hot in the summertime. Bark and sapwood don't like growing over a 140-degree surface.
- **Prune in the right locations** - In all cases where it is possible, prune branches that you're removing just at the pruning collar. The pruning collar is the structure at the base of the branch where the growth of the bark of the trunk or major branch surrounds the bark of the branch or twig - it's noticeable at the base of the branch. Don't damage the pruning collar - prune just above the healthy bark of the trunk or larger branch where possible. When you need to prune a branch back to control length or shape of the plant, prune just beyond a branch bud which is growing in the proper, desired direction. You can't completely get past the tree's genetics in eventual shape but you can control growth that's seriously undesirable.
- **Don't prune too early** - Newly planted trees are the focus here. When you see small, twiggy branches with leaves on the lower trunks of young trees that you know you'll eventually want to remove, and similar for such twigs on your eventual main branches, don't remove them immediately. These growths provide a lot of energy to the tree to help the tree establish and build trunk thickness faster! Prune these lower branches off before they become much thicker than your thumb, and they won't leave a noticeable long-term scar. Don't heavily prune new trees, especially container grown trees, to clean them to their eventual form - a year or two of leaving those small twigs alone will be of great benefit to your tree.

Preferred Types of Shade Trees

The trees listed below have good to great drought tolerance without many pest or disease issues. They're all stars!

- **Pecan** - State tree of Texas, native through most of the state, a long-lasting tree. Feed extra zinc if you're looking for a good harvest of nuts on more mature trees. Deciduous. Average landscape size - 60-80' tall x 60-80' wide.
- **Shumard Red Oak** - The best adapted red oak for our area! Handles our heavy clay and alkaline pH very well. Good red and yellow fall color most years. Deciduous. Average landscape size - 60-80' tall x 50-60' wide.
- **Live Oak** - Absolutely the standard in tough trees! Live oaks are partially evergreen in our area - they'll thin during the fall and winter depending upon weather, kick their old foliage off just as new leaves are arriving in the spring. Average landscape size - 50-80' tall x 50-80' wide.
- **Bur Oak** - A native oak to Texas (and our area, North Texas), makes a large, rounded oak with yellow fall color. Extremely large acorns! The bark is thick and cork-like. Deciduous. Average landscape size - 60-80' tall x 50-60' wide.

- **Chinquapin Oak** - Another native Texas oak, this oak has a flaky bark with an interesting appearance and a saw-toothed leaf. Deciduous. Average landscape size - 70' tall x 40-50' wide.
- **Chinese Pistache** - A Texas Superstar, this tree has a good speed of growth with great yellow, orange, and red fall coloration. Deciduous. Average landscape size - 25-30' tall x 25-30' wide.
- **Cedar Elm** - Native to Texas, average landscape size 50-60' tall x 30-40' wide.
- Drought tolerant, adaptable to a wide variety of soils, including our clay. Deciduous.
- **Shantung Maple** - A Chinese import, this tree is still on the Texas Superstar list for its tolerance of hot weather and alkaline soils. This tree is a wonderful smaller tree, maturing at 35' tall x 25' wide. Yellow, orange, sometimes a hint of red fall color, this color will vary from tree to tree.
- **Bigtooth Maple** - A true native Texas maple which is heat tolerant, fast growing, and gets astoundingly good fall color of orange and red colors. Average landscape size 50' tall x 30-40' wide. Deciduous.
- **Southern Magnolias** - We prefer varieties like "D.D. Blanchard", a darker-leaved variety with glossy foliage and big, fragrant flowers. Evergreen, average landscape size 50-60' tall x 30' wide.
- **Bald Cypress** - Yes, this is on our list! Use this tree to "dry out" naturally wet areas or drainage areas in your landscape, and it will reward you with vigorous growth and bright green foliage. Orange-brown fall color, average landscape size 60-75' tall x 25-30' wide. Deciduous. (Not recommended for planting in dry spots.)

Preferred Types of Ornamental/Barrier Tree

The plants listed below fill a useful niche - they're anywhere from 15-25' tall based on variety, and can make a useful barrier row for tough-to-plant locations, or have an interesting bloom or leaf color.

- **Crape Myrtle (tall types)** - They bloom for three months. That's mighty hard to beat, and make a nice row screen or individual accent plant/small tree.
- **Smoke Tree** - Better as an individual accent, smoke trees are very drought tolerant and most commercial types have a nice maroon color to new growth that makes this plant stand out.
- **Chaste Tree** - It blooms blue for much of the summer! Nice accent plant or small ornamental tree if the bottom branches are cleaned up.
- **Yaupon Holly (and all upright hollies that fall in the 15'-25' height range)** - Great as an anchor plant in the shrub beds, any number of larger upright hollies are well suited for use as a screen in our area. Drought tolerant, pest resistant.
- **Mexican Plum** - For two weeks in spring, Mexican plums are stunning in bloom. The rest of the time, they're an extremely drought resistant small ornamental tree.
- **Texas Mountain Laurel** - Chains of blue flowers in the early spring - grape-scented like wisteria! An individual accent plant well suited for areas of high drainage and low water.
- **Redbud** - Best as an understory tree around larger shade trees, or somewhere they get a little protection from the worst of the summer sunshine. Three weeks of gorgeous purplish or pinkish blooms before the leaves come out in spring.
- **Eastern Red Cedar** - Outstanding windbreak or privacy screen. Need basically no watering once established. Native to our area!
- **Little Gem & Teddy Bear dwarf Magnolias** - All the beauty of a full size magnolia, with fragrance and bloom, on a much smaller ornamental tree.
- **Desert Willow** - Extremely drought tolerant, snapdragon-like blooms for much of the late spring and early summer, with another set of blooms occasionally in the summer based upon rainfall. It's a nice plant! Use it as an individual accent or a very loose row - it's not well suited for privacy as this plant is airy and open.