

Let's Talk Gardening

October 1, 2004
Tom Harris, Ph. D.
The Country Gardener

October is Tree-Planting Time

This month is the absolute best time to plant new trees. It's not so hot that they droop and drop all their leaves and its cool enough that they don't scald or get sun-burned (that's right—young trees with tender bark can actually get sunburned and it really affects them later on.)

There are lots of trees that do very well in our cruddy soil. We call most of them "native trees" because they flourish in this part of the country. As you probably already know, most of the trees that do well here are in the oak family. We have white oaks and red oaks. White oaks typically don't drop their leaves until the spring (live oaks and Monterrey oaks). Red oaks are the ones that turn color and drop their leaves in the fall (Texas red oak is the most popular one). The chinquapin (pronounced "chink-a-pin") oak has leaves which look almost exactly like live-oak leaves, but they're about twice as big. It grows to about 60 feet x 35-40 feet. The Shumard red oak gets about the same size and changes colors in the fall. If you wanna know how to tell a red oak from a white oak, look at the leaves. Red oak leaves are pointy at the ends of the lobes on the leaves. White oak leaves have lobes that are more rounded. Burr oaks are white oaks, for example. Live oaks are an exception, though; they a hybrid red oak with rounded leaves.

Other trees which are spectacular in the fall are the maples. The shantung maple is a small one that only gets about 25 feet tall and about 20 feet wide. It has leaves that look just like the maple trees in Maine and they turn red in the fall. The Uvalde Big-tooth Maple will get to about 60 feet in our soil but it's about the only maple tree that will get that big. It also has leaves which change colors in the fall.

Crape myrtles are one of the best trees you can get for our area nowadays. You can get them in almost any size you want/need, from about 12-15 inches to about 50 feet; and the colors today are beautiful. Anything from white to deep purple and a new bright red one called "Dynamite." Deer will eat the young tree's foliage, and the bucks will rub their horns on the young trees, so you're gonna have to fence them for a couple of years.

A redbud tree is a beautiful specimen of another Texas native. They do best if you use them as an "under-story" tree; that is, plant them in the shade of a taller tree. Their broad leaves get too much sunlight if they're planted out by themselves and the leaves will burn. Redbuds only get to about 15-20 feet tall and do very well in the shade of live oaks, for example. They're one of the first trees to bloom in the spring with their pink flowers. Plus, the deer don't eat them.

If you've ever seen a desert willow in the summer time, you've probably commented about how beautiful it was with all the little purple flowers shaped like a cross between a daffodil and an orchid. I've got about 14-15 of them around the circular drive and they've been in bloom all summer—off and on. This year was a little hard on them with all the rain, but they made it. They're a xeriscape plant that doesn't want or need much water to survive...the first word in their name is 'desert' after all...duh!

A nice small tree for that special spot over there by the fence is a yaupon holly. You're probably familiar with the dwarf which is used as a foundation plant. The "regular" yaupon gets about 12-15 feet tall, is very open and airy and responds well to our soils, rain fall, etc. It doesn't take much care either. In addition, you can prune it to almost any shape you want. You've probably seen the yaupon shaped into various animals around town. Cute.

Do some comparison shopping if you're planning on buying large trees. Ask about delivery, planting, and warranties. Do not fertilize trees and shrubs now. It will stimulate new growth which might freeze later.

As they start to fall, collect leaves and put them in the compost pile.

Send your comments and/or questions to gardener@gvtc.com.