

Trees Have it All!

People have been cutting down trees as long as there have been people with the tools to do the job. For millennia there was a balance- lots of trees, not so many people. With the burgeoning of our species in the last decades and the clearing of mighty rainforests to raise meat for mighty-burgers, it seems a good time to plant a tree.

The golden days of October provide the perfect time for tree planting. The next question: "Which tree shall I plant?" It is logical that those trees native to a place will do best. But we gardeners have a long history of wanting to try something different or difficult. An old, really old, story is that of Queen Hatshepsut ordering 32 frankincense (*Boswellia*) trees moved from the land of Punt (Somalia). Dug up with large root balls and packed into wicker baskets, they traveled to Egypt to be planted at a temple. This was in 1495 BC and 31 survived.

Even today, olive connoisseurs claim Greek olives are tastiest and for ages the Greeks were famous for taking their olive trees with them to wherever they moved. Not that trees need people to move them from place to place. Windblown or bird carried, seeds arrive and home gardeners find their hardest weeding is uprooting strays such as mimosa, gum, maple, holly, that have dug in next to the foundation.

In choosing a tree, size matters. Not only must the size of the tree be considered but the size of the leaves. I do not rake leaves so I have a little leaf linden, river birch, and a beech in front. Small leaves take care of themselves. White oaks, maples, and tulip poplars have large leaves that must not pile up on grass lawns. Slender willow oak leaves also slip away, but a tree, like a pet, is worth any amount of trouble if you love it, but pay attention to what you are signing on to.

For a sunny spot, maples are good and now comes a newly noticed old native that is tolerant of shade. *Acer spicatum*, sometimes called forest maple or mountain maple is really an understory tree as it grows to only about 20'. It boasts a short trunk and a round full head. Its winged seeds are red as are the new shoots. Orange, red, and purple in fall, it has pretty red buds in spring opening to panicles of white flowers.

Another maple loved for its peeling orange/brown bark is *A. griseum*, the paperbark maple. It is an excellent small, to 30', slow-growing tree. Maples abound, about 150 species are available, but avoid the Norway maple, *A. platanoides*, even the one with handsome purple leaves that still becomes a bully. The silver or soft maple, *A. saccharinum*, is easily damaged by storms: it is *A. saccharum* that is the hard or rock maple great for furniture, maple sugar, and planting in your front lawn for a large shade tree.

For smaller spaces my favorite tree is the native hornbeam, *Carpinus caroliniana*, called American hornbeam, blue beech, ironwood. I've also heard it called muscle tree for the sinuous conformation of its grey trunk. One reason I love it is the behavior it incites in my resident squirrels. In late summer they dangle like earrings from the skinniest outer branches to gather the tiny green fruit nestled in small racemes of bracts. Ironwood doesn't appear in stores but the internet will find it for you. Most of us have them because they were here when we came.

Not enough good things can be said about trees. They are not only fashionable but economic, saving costs in heating and cooling your house when planted to shade windows and walls from the hot western sun and saving heating costs by buffering your house against winter's cold winds. I have just read that scientists at the Horticultural department of National Taiwan University have tested ten species of trees and two of bamboo for their ability to cool air and soil temperatures and came up with actual numbers for the skeptics. They do make a big difference!

Once established (buy small!) trees are undemanding. Shade trees can manage without extra water unless of course, they have been put into a spot where paving encroaches on their root space. You've seen it happen when concrete surrounds a tree and it struggles and dies, proof that someone was not thinking.

A native returns! The estimate of the number of trees lost to the American chestnut blight is four billion but a hundred years later there is hope of its return. There are breeding programs with blight-resistant trees from crosses of the American chestnut with Asian species. The breeding effort has two foci: tall timber and smaller nut trees. More genetic news comes from scientists at the N.Y. College of Environmental Science at Syracuse who study genes that neutralize attacking fungi. Amazing! People who love those nuts will be hopeful.