Shade Tree Planting

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Now that we crossed into fall the temperatures are dropping and soil moisture is more reliable. It is a good time to plant shade trees. Trees planted now have time to develop a root system before they must face the challenge of our hot dry summer.

Select your tree or trees based on their appearance but also on their drought tolerance, disease resistance, growth rate, longevity, and growth characteristics.

A shade tree planted on the West or South side of the house will have a major positive impact on air conditioning costs. Allow at least 25 ft. between the tree and the house and 40 ft. between large growing shade trees.

If your soil is shallow or difficult to dig, purchase a small specimen so that digging the right size planting hole does not challenge your health.

Dig the planting hole the same depth as the root ball or container and 2 to 3 time as wide. Refill the planting hole with the soil that was removed. It can be a problem if you fill the planting hole with potting mix or compost. The water can enter the hole faster than it can escape. The result could be soggy soil and root rot.

At planting time run the hose on the root area until the hole fills with water. Cover the soil with 3 to 4 inches of mulch. Re-water every time the soil under the mulch dries to the touch. The lawn sprinkler used every week will not do the job because the water doesn’t penetrate the entire root ball.

The recommended shade tree varieties include Texas red oak, Shumardi red oak, Mexican white oak, cedar elm, Mexican sycamore, Chinese pistache, bur oak, chinkapin oak, cedar elm, and live oak.

The red oaks, Mexican white oak, and Mexican sycamore grow the fastest across a wide range of soils. Live oak and Mexican oak are considered to be evergreen even though they do have a brief period of leaf drop most years.

Bur oak and Mexican sycamore have very large leaves which can be interesting in the landscape. Chinese pistache and Texas red oak often produce good fall color.

The oaks can be infected by oak wilt but even live oaks and red oaks, which are the most susceptible, rarely contract the disease if you are careful about painting pruning cuts and alert to tree performance around your neighborhood.

If considering a sycamore, make sure you obtain the Mexican species and not the American sycamore. To reassure yourself, select your sycamore before the leaves fall. The Mexican version has a hairy leaf bottom and the American sycamore leaf bottom is smooth. American sycamores grow fast and die young from anthracnose fungus in our area.

Pecan is no longer listed as a recommended shade tree for most San Antonio landscapes because of its characteristics. Pecans are susceptible to attacks by aphids which produce honeydew which drips down coats everything under the tree. It is difficult to water enough and spray the pesticides required to produce a reliable nut crop. The species is also prone to limb drop which requires close monitoring by an arborist.

Arizona Ash is another common shade tree that is no longer on the recommended plant list. They grow fast but are short lived with a penchant for forming weak crotch joints and being infected by anthracnose leaf fungus.

For more information on the individual shade tree species, visit plantanswers.com.