

The Shade Tree B List

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Shade is a valuable commodity in the San Antonio area. There is an A-List of recommended shade trees that includes live oak, Texas red oak, cedar elm, Shumard oak, Mexican sycamore, bur oak, chinkapin oak, Mexican white oak, and Chinese pistache. They are long-lived, drought tolerant, relatively pest free, and attractive. These species of shade trees add value to your landscape beyond the value of the shade. There are a number of tree species, however, that do not have enough positive characteristics to merit a consistent A-Rating.

Does the fact that live oaks and red oaks such as Texas red oak and Shumard oak are susceptible to oak wilt move them from the A list of the best shade trees for San Antonio area landscapes? Not in my opinion. Once a live oak or red oak contracts the disease there is a high probability that the tree will die but it is relatively easy to prevent the spread of the disease by painting wounds on oaks and discarding the carcasses of infected red oaks. Oak wilt is a complication to consider in planting live and red oaks for shade trees, but the exceptional characteristics of drought and soil tolerance, longevity, and attractive appearance overcome the small likelihood that the specimens will be infected with oak wilt.

A tree species that was once considered to be very desirable to plant as a shade tree but has fallen to the B List is pecan. Pecan does best in deep soils such as stream beds. They don't perform as well in rocky shallow soils. The number one characteristic of using pecans in the landscape was that you obtained shade and could harvest the nuts. That was especially true if you could apply 2 inches of water to the trees each week and spray pesticides into the tall trees. With water more expensive; drought restrictions common; and neighbors less tolerant of spraying, nut crops are more erratic. Another issue is that pecans grow very large and out grow our smaller modern lots. When you plant a pecan it becomes a neighborhood tree rather than a single lot tree. Pecans also are prone to drop branches unless you provide regular pruning. Honeydew is not as dangerous as branches falling but the sticky aphid excrement it is an unpleasant coating to automobiles and swing sets.

Mulberries are one of the best trees for providing berries for the birds in the spring and for that reason they are often planted or allowed to survive in the back or corner of a landscape. They are a B list shade tree however because of their tendency to spread to wherever birds roost and because the generally unattractive crown conformation is susceptible to limb breakage.

Chinaberry grows very fast, has a light purple bloom every spring, and produces large crops of berries every year. The tree is on the B-list for desirability as a shade tree because the huge crop of berries produces an equally large crop of seedlings each year even though the birds don't seem to care for them. Chinaberry is also short-lived in our area because of its sensitivity to cold weather. The wood is soft and damage to branches is common.

Maples are one of the most desirable group of shade trees in most regions of the nation but in the Southwest it is generally a waste of time to plant them. They don't survive our alkaline soils and hot dry weather. They are on the B-list for shade trees for the San Antonio Region because they don't survive long enough to produce any shade.

Hackberries are one of the most common shade trees in the San Antonio area even though very few are actually planted by homeowners. With the help of the birds and a huge seed crop every summer a new

crop of hackberries germinates every year. In East Texas and further east the species develops an acceptable crown shape and is relatively long-lived but here the limbs appear to be tangled and there is considerable limb breakage. The limb breakage, vascular disruptions and fungal infections result in a relatively short life for most hackberries.

Several generations ago Arizona ash was considered an A-List tree by residential builders and was planted as the shade tree at new home construction. It turns out they grew fast but were short lived. They had some of the same structural problems as hackberries and required regular attention from an arborist to avoid vascular problems, limb breakage, and poor conformation. Arizona ash were also attacked by anthracnose, a foliar fungal disease, each spring. Over several generations they have slipped to the B-List.