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News Release

Small Tree Suggestions

Question: I would like some suggestions on small trees I could use as street side trees or for under power lines.

Answer: This same question could be asked for good selections for road medians where a smaller very durable tree is desired. The plant that immediately comes to mind is the ubiquitous crape myrtle. Crape myrtles are widely planted for a reason. They are tough as nails, drought tolerant, they can take tremendous abuse from pruning, and they are very attractive multi-season plants. They would be much more attractive if they were properly pruned (that's another article). In addition, they come in a multitude of sizes from dwarf shrubs of a couple feet to medium sized trees reaching 30 to 40 feet. You can easily find powdery mildew resistant cultivars which once was a very serious flaw in the crape myrtles character.

If you have crape myrtle fatigue, do not fear. There are many good choices of plants to fill the niche you have whether under a power line or as a street tree. One smaller tree to consider is 'Brandywine', a red maple with long lasting, eye-catching fall color. Autumn coloration begins in mid-fall and lasts up to 14 days or more, gradually turning from red to a brilliant red-purple. A male selection, 'Brandywine' can be used in the landscape without fear of generating undesirable weedy seedlings. 'Brandywine' is oval in shape and exhibits significant tolerance to leafhopper, one of the major pests of landscape red maples. It is a small maple only reaching 25 feet tall with a 12 foot spread in 12 years of growth. Two other small red maples to consider are 'Somerset' and 'Sun Valley'. These two are also male selections and reach about the same height.

People seem to love the 'Bradford' pear despite its terribly weak branching habit. To those folks I would suggest you consider some of the great crabapples. One in particular you might consider is 'Adirondack' which exhibits a combination of many desirable traits that make it a near-perfect crabapple. The narrow, upright-branched growth habit combines with an annual bloom cycle similar to 'Bradford' pear. In addition it has an abundance of small, persistent fruit, slow to moderate growth rate, and multiple disease tolerance that is rare in crabapple. The tree will eventually reach a height of 20 feet with a spread of about 15 feet but this takes about 20 years. Since the fruit are so persistent and the birds love them they are not as messy as some crabapples.

Although flowering cherries are not extremely long lived trees they are beautiful plants worthy of use under power lines or as street trees. I would suggest you consider 'Dream Catcher' which is a release from the flowering cherry genetic improvement program at the U.S. National Arboretum. It offers year-round ornamental features, high tolerance to insects and diseases, and rapid early growth. It will reach the size of the crabapple described earlier much faster but it will not live as long. Flowering cherries must be planted in well drained soils but they are not very drought tolerant.

A wonderful small flowering tree that is very drought tolerant is Chaste tree (*Vitex agnus-castus*). Like many members of this plant family, Chaste tree attracts butterflies and other insects. The older cultivars had small spikes of flowers in pale lilac, mauve, off-white or light pink, but modern, much improved varieties such as 'Montrose Purple', LeCompte', or the 'Salinas Pink' have spikes as long as 8 to 12 inches in length. The blooms remind you of butterfly bush or lilacs. Although the blooms are not notably fragrant like the lilac they may produce aromatic black or brown seeds, but if the spent spikes are cut off promptly after the first flowering the shrub will bloom again and again all summer.

These are just a few choices to consider. For more information about good small trees to consider visit: www.powertrees.com or contact Tony Glover, Regional Extension Agent-Home Horticulture, Home Gardens and Home Pest Management at the St. Clair County Extension Office at (205) 338-9416 or email gloveta@auburn.edu.

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