

Ask a few questions before planting new trees

By Rick Beauchamp
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Now is the ideal time to select trees for our landscape. Most nurseries begin receiving their trees, and by planting in the fall, the tree's roots become established before the top growth begins next spring.

People often embark on the process of tree selection in a backward fashion. They see a nice, small tree for sale, then they try to find an empty spot in their yard where it would look attractive. This "method" of tree selection leads to many problems later for the average homeowner.

Trees, after all, have spent millions of years practicing how to be better than other trees on particular sites. Pines are very competitive in the sunshine on poor dry soils, while dogwoods are very strong in the shade and rich moist soils. Reverse the sites, and neither will grow well. The key is to start by asking questions about the tree's habits and needs, then see if that is what your site offers. The following are some questions you can ask that will help you match your tree to its site:

1. *How tall will the tree grow?* This may sound basic, but people seem to forget that little trees have a habit of becoming big trees. The most common example may be all the fast-growing maples that are planted underneath power lines, where they will do nothing but cause trouble.
2. *How wide will the tree grow?* Here's another basic concern that is routinely ignored. I cannot count how many "cute" Natchez crape myrtles I have seen planted within a few feet of a building. Try to plan and plant for mature width and height.
3. *How much light does it need?* Trees that have evolved for full sun or shade often grow poorly when located in a very different light environment. Flowering dogwood is a good example. It is a beautiful, small tree that many people love. Its native habitat is in the forest understory, and it does poorly in full sun.
4. *Is the tree unusually susceptible to insects?* Trees are not equally resistant against serious insects on all sites and in all climates. A number of birches are prone to borers or arborvitae.
5. *What about a tree's susceptibility to disease?* Many crabapples and hawthorns fall prey to debilitating diseases. You should avoid those that do.
6. *Does the tree have serious structure problems?* Certain trees are known to produce weak structures and will crack apart as they age. Bradford pear is known as a tree with structure problems and brittle wood.
7. *Can the tree tolerate the soil acidity found in your yard?* Many of our tree species have evolved for acid soil conditions; they will grow poorly and even die on alkaline soils. Pin oaks and sweet gum, for instance, are beautiful, but grow poorly on clay soils because they cannot take up enough iron.
8. *Can it tolerate the average amount of ground water on your site?* Trees that thrive on a very dry or very wet site often have difficulty growing well when planted in a different water situation. For example, Leyland cypresses have major disease problems related to drought stress.
9. *Is the tree invasive?* Some trees grow so fast or produce so much seed that they aren't good selections for many sites. Silver maples and Chinese tallow trees have become problem trees and the latter have become invasive species. Neither tree is recommended for planting.

Rick Beauchamp is the Elmore County Extension coordinator.