

# CHOOSING A NEW TREE

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New trees should be treated like an investment; an investment of both your time and money, something that should not be taken lightly. Just like any other investment, doing some research and consulting a professional before making your decision usually leads to a much bigger (and more reliable) return on your initial investment. Trees are no different, there are many factors to consider, many avenues to explore, and many opportunities for profit or loss depending on how you go about choosing and planting them. Here are some things to consider when choosing and planting a new tree.

## Purpose

Are you trying to create shade, create a privacy barrier, make a windbreak, or just add some height or color to your landscape? Different trees have different functions and some have multiple functions, but until you have a clear idea of your needs, you won't be able to make the best tree decisions.

## Planting Area

Often, the planting site influences the tree selection (or at least should for success). Not all trees are suitable for planting in lawns, few trees are suitable for streetside planting, and you should really rethink your plans if the area is waterlogged during the winter. Some trees are simply better suited for different conditions than others. Some trees are more tolerant of moisture, some are more drought tolerant, some can *survive* (not necessarily thrive) in poor soil, and some trees will die at the mere mention of any of these conditions. The good news is that some of these conditions are fixable with a little bit of extra effort. Sometimes a condition is not fixable, in which case you need to choose your tree accordingly, and with more care. Although many trees are adaptable enough to stay alive in poor conditions, they will usually not reach anything close to their full potential.

It is advisable to have your planting area ready before you bring your new tree home. Procrastination can be a tree's worst enemy, especially when it is warm outside. Trees *can* be left in their containers for a short period of time, but they fare much better the quicker they are planted out. Reaching the planting area ahead of time will also allow you to discover any problems that may exist.

## Planting Time

There are great planting times, there are acceptable planting times, and there are poor planting times. Those designations can also be manipulated by how much work you are willing to put into keeping the tree alive. A tree planted in the heat of August (a poor time) can be successful if you are diligent in keeping it supplied with water. However, if you were to plant in the fall (a great planting time), your tree would do much better through the first few years with much less care. Many people tend to want to buy and plant when they notice a need. For instance, most flowering trees are bought and planted during those months in spring when they burst into bloom and give color to neighborhoods. Another common scenario happens when people decide in the heat of summer that they *really* need a shade tree in their yard, and plant then. Not to say that it is horrible to plant when it is warm, but remember that an average nursery-bought tree is not going to throw off enough shade to cool a flea the first year, and it would really be happier and healthier being planted a few months later when the cooler weather returns.

## Overhead Restrictions

Most people will automatically measure or guess how much area they have for a tree to grow width-wise, and that is a very important consideration indeed. Physical obstacles such as fences, houses, walls, etc. all need to be taken into consideration when determining how wide of a tree your site can accommodate. Often overlooked, however, are overhead obstacles. Trees **do not** grow safely and neatly around overhead utility lines, those that grow taller than the overhead lines usually pose a hazard that has to be addressed. If it comes down to a utility line and your tree, your tree is usually going to be addressed in a serious way before the utility companies let it threaten service to their customers. You've seen them around, trees that have been horribly disfigured because they have grown above the lines and needed to be pruned for safety. You can avoid this tragedy by observing your overhead clearance, and planting shorter trees under utility lines if you need to plant a tree there at all.

## Underground Restrictions

First of all, **make sure the area is clear of utility lines before you dig!** If you are planting in a suspect area, utility companies can arrange for a **free** utility locating service to remove any question. It is much better to wait a little bit for a locating company than to cut your phone lines, water lines or take a trip to the emergency room because of underground electrical lines. Many utility lines in this area are only required to be about 18" below ground, so you can see how this can easily be a problem with big trees.

Secondly, **be sure the roots have enough room to grow easily and safely.** Trees use roots for two main purposes – support in the form of stability, and support in the form of water and nutrient uptake. Hinder either of these, and you get a tree that isn't growing properly and healthily, or worse yet, a tree that has structural problems and has become a hazard. Most trees will have roots that stretch at least as wide as the leaf canopy, and many will go far beyond that. You need to be sure when selecting a tree for the site that there is plenty of room for the roots to grow. Roots will not reliably grow where the soil is heavily compacted or waterlogged, so don't think that they will "just grow under" a sidewalk or driveway. This is when the tree gets irritated at you and starts pushing up your sidewalks and driveways. Pretty much any tree, no matter how well behaved it *usually* is, will become a "surface-rooter" if given poor enough soil. Compacted and wet soil is lacking in oxygen, and is incredibly hard to move through (you dug the planting hole, so you should know how heavy the soil is!). Most cases of walkway/driveway damage are simply due to the wrong tree in the wrong spot or the wrong spot altogether, not a "bad" tree trying to make you miserable.

## Municipal Restrictions

Some cities and counties regulate the types of trees that may be planted along their streets. Most notable is Portland, which has a fairly strong set of urban forestry regulations. These restrictions are not there to be an irritant to you, they are there to make sure that there is some rhyme or reason to streetside plantings, and that improper trees are not placed in areas where they will be too big or cause other problems. Also, a monoculture of trees poses possible disease and insect problems. Finally, even though I know no one reading this is guilty of this, some people base their tree choices on "what's pretty", and not "what's appropriate". Those approved tree lists are there to curb that tendency and set some ground rules for safety, functionality, and aesthetics. However, these approved tree lists are not set in stone, and they can grant permission for other trees not on the lists **if they are appropriate**. Some areas also require a certain size of tree be planted initially; this is usually to ensure a good strong start and also make sure the trees aren't as prone to vandalism and accidental damage.

## Commit yourself to success

Don't look at it as just a tree, look at it like a member of your family or a pet. Kind of like a dog, except less mess (sometimes...) and you don't have to feed it as much. People tend to take better care of those things that they actually place value on or care about. You spent money on it, hopefully you spent some time studying and readying the area for it, you've dreamt about the wonderful shade it will someday provide, but it doesn't end there. Trees usually don't just die for no reason, they die because they are neglected, uncared for, or improperly planted or sited. Trees are by no means attention hogs, but if you are not committed to making your tree a success, you may as well fire up the wood-chipper now...

## Finally...

What do you like? Ultimately, assuming you took all of these other factors into consideration, this new tree will be with you for a long time. Consult nursery professionals, read plant books (the picture books are especially helpful!), and visit an arboretum to see mature specimens of the trees you particularly like. Be sure to find out what the tree does in all seasons, as many trees put on fancy airs for a month in spring, but become dirty couch potatoes for the other eleven months. An exceptional tree will have year round interest (note that this doesn't mean year round leaves and flowers), and still suit the purpose for which it was selected. A tree decision is not one that you want to rush or take lightly, as you could be living with it for the rest of your life!