

Consideration of Species on The Recommended Street Tree Planting List

Trees that will be planted on boulevards or tree strips or median strips must be more hardy than trees that will spend their lives on estate lawns or parks, or even small back yards. Drought, poor soil, compaction, inadequate root space, road salt, and physical assault by vehicles are just some of the affronts to “street trees”. Tree planting strips alongside the street are not “natural conditions” for trees and therefore we should not be too quick to condemn the planting of “non-native” trees into these conditions. Trees don’t grow in a vacuum of course, and the tree planted on the boulevard will both influence, and be influenced by, trees in yards and parks adjacent to the streets in sunlight and water demands.

Although we can find many examples of “full grown” large trees existing in narrow tree strips, the long term health and safety of the tree must be considered. Generally a five foot width is considered to be the minimum width of soil/grass in to which to put a tree that has an adult potential of over 20 feet height. Overhead utility wires are another obvious restriction on some boulevards and logical common-sense should tell us not to plant a tree that will grow to a height of greater than 15-20 feet under these wires.

In consideration of the past and current insect and disease pests most people have heard of, the exclusion of ash (*Fraxinus spp.*) from a recommended list of trees to be planted anywhere is not unusual. The emerald ash borer insect remains an active threat against ash trees. Not so well known is the impending threat of another Asian insect, the long-horned beetle. This critter has already invaded the Midwest, and wreaked havoc on maple, and other trees, in the Chicago area in the early 21st century. Through a major and costly tree removal and tree chemical treatment effort, the pest was actually eliminated from the Chicago area. The pest still is found on the east coast and when the question is asked, “how far can it travel in a day?” the answer is “about three thousand miles”. Domestic air freight is not given even the minimal inspection that incoming foreign freight is subject to. This pest attacks maples, but also elm and other tree treats. Because maple already is overplanted on our boulevards and in our yards, as well as being a potential target of the Asian long-horned beetle, you will not often find maple species on recommended tree lists now days. Let’s give maple a break!

While all trees look superficially alike...being tall and green; not all trees are interchangeable in their soil, water, and space requirements, nor in the type of environmental services they provide. Some produce spectacular flowers, some produce edible, or wildlife attracting, fruit, some produce dense shade, and others a dappled shade that allows grass to grow underneath. Most tree planting lists are not intended to be a final “Chinese Menu” list for the typical homeowner to choose freely by selecting “one of each”, but rather should be used in consultation with a trained arborist or other landscape professional to fit the homeowner’s specific planting site and expectations.

The changing climate is another consideration when selecting trees, not just for street planting, but elsewhere as well. Predictions have been made regarding the average temperature and growing conditions we can expect to be common in the La Crosse area in 2050, 35 years from now, and well within the life span of mature trees we will want gracing the streets for our children and grandchildren in the not too distant future. The planting suggestions for New York City and Chicago include some Zone 5 and 6 species that may not be too radical to consider for 2016 planting in western Wisconsin.