

Tree Ecology or Native Habitat is Important to Landscape Placement

I am frequently asked to recommend a species of tree to plant. There are two obvious questions to help guide me and you on our answer. The first question is Why?. What exactly does the client expect the tree to do for them...why do they want a tree. The second question is Where?...that is the more-or-less exact location, and not just referring to the property in general.

The first question to answer is WHY. Possible answers include: 1) provide shade to the house, especially from the south or west sun light, 2) provide overall beauty and aesthetics to the property and increase its monetary value for eventual resale, 3) because a tree was recently removed from the site and "there has always been a tree there", 4) subdivision covenants may require a certain percentage of tree crown cover, or simply 5) the people like trees and want a tree.

WHERE is the next question and more complicated. First, where is the property in general in relation to the world. Is it in an older urban neighborhood with small lots and an established "forest" of trees on the subject property and other private lots in the neighborhood as well as planted tree strips and public areas; or is the area a semi-rural lot, with large areas of "natural" woodlots and wooded watercourses, and large residential lots generally with many trees on these lots; or is the area new subdivision with large lots but recently created from former agricultural or pasture land on open ridgetops and seemingly constant wind blowing.

Then, once the general landscape area is determined, where more specifically is the tree(s) to be planted? In a row, or allie, along either side of an entrance drive, or nestled close to the house in a heavily manicured area to share space with flowers and low shrubs, along a naturalized fence row or woodlot edge, or seemingly randomly in the middle of a manicured turf lawn.

Look to the natural SILVICS or ecology of the genus and species of trees. What is the natural environment in which one would find a naturally growing tree of that species. Even "exotics" or non-North American native trees have a natural ecology in their homeland...unless they are a Ginkgo, or have been highbred to unnaturalness over years of nursery experimentation.

Everyone seems smitten by Maples...perhaps they are not really familiar with other trees, perhaps they think other trees "grow too slowly" (oak is frequently criticized for this trait), perhaps they are "dirty". For whatever reason, maples become overplanted in general, and often in areas where they are not ecologically suited and therefore in a

constant state of low-grade stress from the moment they are put in the ground by the well-meaning home owner. A heavily turfed lawn on a sunny windswept ridge top several hundred feet or more from a native woodlot, itself on a south facing slope, is NOT the ideal habitat to stick a Silver Maple, or one of its horticultural crosses with red maple, such as Autumn Blaze. In nature a stand-alone maple tree would not likely grow there! Maples are happier with other maples, or at least other trees, and they prefer a more moist habitat...or a mesic forest as an ecologist would call it. The windswept dry, or xeric, ridgetop is ecologically more like a prairie or savanna, and trees like bur oak or hickory, or possibly walnut, would be happier there.

In more moist and/or shadier areas, maples might be better suited, but even then consider native sugar maple rather than the "less costly" silver maple varieties. The supposedly faster growth of these trees is often outweighed by the weaker wood and poorer branching structure which can mean greater maintenance and poorer form as the tree gets larger.

In general trees that are native to the specific area where they are to be planted are most likely to be "ecologically active". Every tree is, or ideally should be, an active mini-eco system, with its own fungi, insects and other arthropods, amphibians, birds, and mammals living in and around it. Non-native trees, some of which are touted to be "pest free", are often "ecological deserts"...no fungi and bacteria, therefore no insects that feed on that material...no insects, therefore no birds or amphibians that feed on them...therefore...less interesting landscape.

Robert Fisher

Graduate Forester

Certified Arborist WI 0150

Owner, Nature's Way Tree and Shrub Care

La Crosse, Wisconsin

rfisher1251@gmail.com

608 88 5828