

# Tree Planting: Think about it

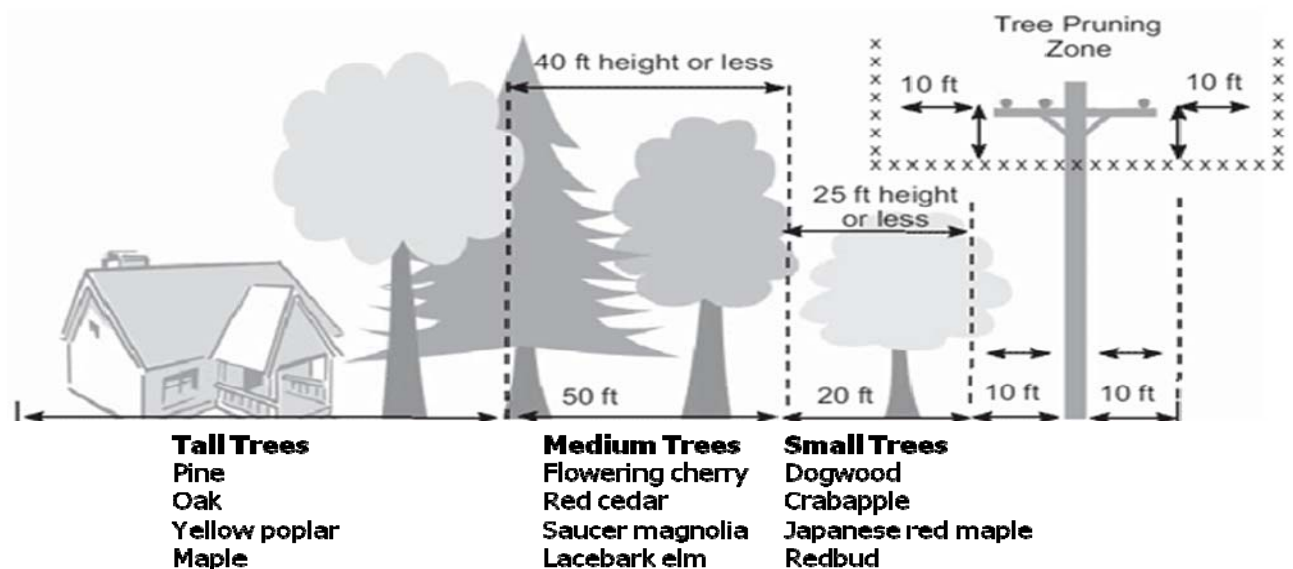
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By John Hendrickson, Community Forester

The halcyon days of spring are here again and the arborist in all of us is just itching to get out there and plant a tree. But before you do, take a look around. A little thoughtful planning and observation prior to digging can prevent a lot of headaches for you and stress for that tree in the future.

Ask yourself a few questions before you head to your local garden center. What is the purpose of my tree? For shading west and southwest exposures during the heat of the summer, oaks and maples are good candidates. Evergreen species however, will provide shade all year long, and you may not appreciate that trait during the winter. But evergreens, like magnolia and hollies, do make an excellent privacy screen for your backyard. Mature size, form, longevity, and ornamental traits are additional considerations. Determine the function of the tree in the landscape and then choose a species that will provide those attributes.

Next, look up. Your tree is going to grow that direction, of course, but it's amazing to see how some folks don't seem to grasp this. If you're standing under power lines, cable or telephone wires, or near a street light, don't plant your tree there. Utility companies in the United States, and ultimately their customers, spend over a billion dollars annually trimming trees to maintain right-of-ways. Here are some guidelines:



Now, look down. Choose a species that's adaptable to your soil conditions. Poor drainage and soil compaction seem to be common problems for urban landscape trees in our area. Native species that can tolerate wet conditions and compacted soils include bald cypress, black gum, hawthorn, red maple, and river birch. Trees need lots of rooting space to grow into. Roots often extend well past the dripline of the canopy and can compete for moisture with other plants in your yard. When structural surface roots of species like red oak or sweetgum encounter sidewalks, driveways, or other paved areas it's the tree that usually wins the battle. Roots of some species, willow and sycamore in particular, have a propensity for clogging sewer lines and drain tiles. Locate the planting site so that you can avoid these confrontations. And "call before you dig", of course, to avoid damage to underground utilities.

Then, look around. Mature height, crown shape, and spread should be used as a guide for determining spacing between trees and planting distance from structures. Hackberry, pines, and oaks are large specimen trees that are going to need plenty of room to grow. Many commercial tree cultivars are developed specifically to fit into smaller spaces. But remember that trees are long-lived, and that the 3' sapling you plant today is going to get a lot bigger. Existing trees may compete for space, light, and moisture with your new tree. Dogwood and redbud will thrive in partial shade as understory specimens.

Spacing Guide for Landscape Trees			
Mature Height	Between Plants	Min. spacing from a wall	Min. spacing from a corner
Small trees (<30')	6-15'	8-10'	6-8'
Medium trees (30-70')	30-40'	15'	12'
Large trees (>70')	40-50'	20'	15'

With a little planning you can expect to enjoy your new tree for many years. Choose the right tree for the right place. Now, get out there and plant a tree.



**Poor Planning: Redbud**  
(*Cercis canadensis*)



**Good Planning: Black gum**  
(*Nyssa sylvatica*)