

BV/S neighbor and Travis County Master Gardener Reeve Hobbie is glad to be able to offer pertinent gardening subjects in articles throughout the year.

The Ps of Trees

by Reeve Hobbie

The last article I posted to our homeowners' association online newsletter (which can be found below) was about landscaping. Trees are a very big part of any landscape. They are the anchor of all your plantings and need to be considered up front in your plans.

Despite the fact that there are literally tons of books about trees available to you, I'm going to offer my thoughts on the subject that are particularly applicable to Central Texas. If you continue reading, you're going to hear about plant preferences, proper planting, preferred planting periods and pruning. (Can't think of any other pertinent Ps for trees.)

Plant Preferences

There are so many choices of trees that will grow well in our rocky, alkaline and cloddy, clay soil. Sometimes I think it's outright amazing that they succeed. But there are also trees that don't fare so well. I once asked Skip Richter, former director of AgriLife Extension Service for Travis County, what to do with my two very tall anemic-looking sweetgum trees. He advised that I dig them up and plant them 100 miles east of here. I eventually lost both tree to chlorosis. There was nothing that could be done for them.

So what are you looking for in a tree or trees for your yard? Pretty foliage, spring blooms, shade, size, fall color, fruit, nuts, evergreen? Determine that and you can move forward. I think the best list of trees suitable for growing in our area may be found at <http://treefolks.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/Tree-Growing-Guide-for-Central-Texas.pdf>. Also, most local nurseries carry the free *Native and Adapted Landscape Plants* guide, another great resource to have for trees and all your other gardening needs. With either or both guides in hand, you will have all the information you need – things like, how fast your selection will grow, how wide and tall it will get, and whether it will drop its leaves. But I have to add that both

resources list certain oaks that are susceptible to oak wilt, Texas red and live oaks, so I would advise against planting either of them. Personally I would stay away from planting any oaks. There are so many other families of trees from which to make your selection.

Proper Planting

The *Tree Growing Guide*, referenced above, provides a 10-step planting plan. I can simplify that by stating that the hole you dig for each tree should NOT be any deeper than the soil depth of the tree you have purchased. It's the width of the hole that's critical. Dig the hole at least two to three times wider than the ball of the tree. Roots grow horizontally and need loosened soil, not necessarily amended soil, in order to grow. Before removing the tree from the pot or burlap ball, try out the tree in the hole. The soil line in the container must be at grade level or above, but definitely not lower. Now remove the container or burlap and untangle the roots. Fan them out especially if they have been wrapping themselves round and round in the container. This is real important. Stretch out the roots. Hold the tree straight and backfill with soil. Create a saucer around your hole and thoroughly water in. Cover with mulch, but neither dirt nor mulch should touch the new tree's bark. Not now. Not ever.

Preferred Planting Periods

So when may all this happen? Tree planting in Central Texas should take place in our cooler months. Best times are fall and again in February and March before it warms up. Any later than March and you will lose the benefits of a cool and wet springtime start. So consider your needs now and purchase your tree or trees soon.

Pruning

The best time to prune trees, if it's even necessary, is wintertime. Reasons for proceeding might be to remove specific branches to benefit the whole tree, to remove dead, damaged and diseased branches to help prevent insects and decay, or to simply thin a dense canopy on a tree to increase air and sunlight.

For major work, please hire a certified arborist who will know how to prune properly. Some unaccredited outfits tend to "lollipop" or "lion tail" one's trees. That's not good pruning. Sure, it lets more light in, but it's not the best way to treat your trees.

Lastly, **DO NOT PRUNE ANY OAKS BETWEEN FEBRUARY 1 and JUNE 30!** If you don't understand the dangers of how oak wilt spreads during this five month "no cut" period, please read up on it (article below) or visit the Anderson Mill area where there are several infestations killing their oaks.

These are the Ps of trees that I have to offer. It goes without saying that trees are so very important to us, our property's curb appeal and market value. Please be good stewards and manage them well.

If you have questions about your yard or garden, such as needing the name of a certified arborist, please call Travis County Master Gardeners at 512-854-9600. The person at the other end of the line may not have an immediate answer, but they'll research it for you and will get back with you.