LANDSCAPE SHADE TREES

Shade trees are versatile parts of our landscapes. Besides offering shade from the summer sun, they can also offer color to the landscape, help define outdoor spaces and add value to our homes.

The primary concern of most homeowners when it comes to tree selection is rapid growth for the obvious reason of not wanting to wait 15 to 20 years to enjoy its benefits.

Many trees are advertised as “fast growing”. Some are good selections and others are not.

In some cases, the results over the first few years may be very appealing but later disappointing as problems begin to reveal themselves such as trees being oversized for the area or even a lack of growth. Below are a few ideas that will help assist a homeowner in making informed decisions when selecting fast growing trees.

Every tree species has environmental conditions for optimum growth and every planting site has an environment to offer. The more closely the site meets the plant’s requirements, the faster the plant becomes established and grows.

The above-ground factors contributing to a plants performance are temperature, humidity, precipitation and adverse weather conditions. The below-ground factors include soil texture, structure, fertility and under ground obstacles to root growth. Soil testing and careful examination of the site will help in plant selection and prevent future problems.

Fast growing trees can be divided into two categories: long-lived to be used as permanent shade and short-lived to be used only as temporary shade trees. For either category, be sure to select locations so that permanent trees will not outgrow their location and temporary trees won’t interfere with slower growing, more permanent trees.

Shade trees are usually bought balled and burlapped, container-grown or bare-root. Balled or burlapped trees should be planted in late fall, winter or early spring; container grown trees, year-round; and bare-root trees in the winter or early spring. When purchasing balled and burlapped trees, make sure the root system has not been broken and for container grown trees, avoid pot bound root systems.

There are several important steps in the planting procedures. Plant at the proper depth, avoid excessive packing of fill dirt, construct a water basin to hold water initially and mulch with 2-3 inches of pine straw or bark after planting.

Trees should receive 2 tablespoons of a 12-16 percent nitrogen fertilizer (12-4-8 or 16-4-8) per each 10 square foot of root area. Apply in March and July during the first season and avoid excessive fertilizer application to prevent root damage. Following the first year, soil samples should be taken to determine the current season fertility program.

The success of tree establishment depends on matching the tree with the right environment. Fast growing trees that perform well in the northern part of the state may struggle for survival in our area. The Extension Service has available a fast growing tree selection guide that includes a number of fast growing tree species that are divided into their respective growing zones. For more information on selecting fast growing trees for our area, contact the Pierce County Extension Service.