**Small Trees in the Landscape**

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We think about shade trees a lot but don’t always consider the importance of small trees for a landscape. Small trees provide the connection between shrubs and large trees, which is important for aesthetics and wildlife habitat. Small trees can also provide color and interest to a landscape. There is a surprisingly long list of small trees that work well in our yards. There are even a few small trees to avoid.

Redbud can grow to 25 or even 30 feet tall. It is unimpressive most of the year, but in February, when it blooms, it makes a good show because of the pink flowers that cover the stems and the lack of other color plants in the landscape.

The Mexican or Texas (also called Oklahoma) varieties are the best for central Texas. They have relatively small leaves (3 inches) with a shiny, waxy coating. The Eastern redbud has a large (5 inch) flat, green leaf. The Eastern version has trouble surviving our heat and drought. The Forest Pansy selection is tempting because of the attractive purple foliage, but they are especially sensitive to drought.

Redbuds can tolerate full sun but do best as understory trees in partial shade. Plant them at the edge of your lot under other shade trees where the blooms are shown to good advantage in the spring and they link tall shade trees to the rest of the landscape.

Mexican plum also can tolerate partial shade and blooms in the spring. It only grows to 15 feet tall and the white blooms appear after redbuds have bloomed and are not quite as showy. Mexican plum does produce an edible fruit and is a favorite food and nesting site for birds like cardinals and mockingbirds. Mexican plum has some autumn color (yellow) before the leaves fall and makes a nice specimen tree with its round crown.

Loquat is not a native plant, and, in fact, one of its values as a landscaping plant is its exotic look. The tree grows upright to about 20 feet tall. The thick, hairy leaves are long (about 5inches) and 2 inches wide with a “straight out of an Asian jungle” look. Loquats have very few pests and are drought tolerant with the capability to grow in shade or sun. Sometimes in cold weather, they will defoliate temporarily, but generally they are evergreen.

Loquat is also called Japanese plum. The bloom in December is noticeable but not showy. The fruit is very tasty if it doesn’t freeze. The birds and other wildlife appreciate the fruit in February and March.

Use Loquats as specimen trees in full sun or shade. They also make nice tall screens.

Oriental persimmon trees require full sun to prosper. Total height and crown shape are different depending on the variety you select, but all of them are generally 20 feet or under and very showy for much of the year. The large, shiny leaves are dark green. The crown is usually round and compact. The large, red-orange fruit hanging on the tree in the fall looks almost artificial, it is so decorative. Oriental persimmon foliage also has good autumn color before the leaves fall.

Grow oriental persimmon for the fruit and as a specimen tree. The variety “Fuyu” has the least astringent fruit. It can be harvested before it is mushy-ripe. The other varieties taste best when they are mushy-ripe.

Two small trees to avoid are purple leaf plum and Japanese maple. Both have beautiful foliage, but both prefer acidic soil, cool temperatures and regular moisture. Neither lives long in San Antonio soil and weather.

For a relatively small conifer, Arizona cypress is a good choice. Although the tree may eventually grow to 70 feet in some soils, a slow path to 30 feet is more likely in our soils. Arizona cypress has distinctive gray-blue foliage that is as close as we will get to the blue of Colorado blue spruce. It is drought and pest tolerant. Grow Arizona cypress in full sun for the best color, shape and compact crown.