Small Trees to Balance the Landscape

Distribute 06-16-2016

Too often when we think about landscaping we only consider lawns and shade trees. It is important to balance the landscape between shade trees and lawn with perennials, shrubs and small trees. In addition to the aesthetics involved, the perennials, shrubs and small trees allow you to increase color in the landscape and habitat for wildlife such as birds and butterflies. There are a number of small trees to consider.

**Crape myrtles** are a favorite way to add small trees to the landscape. There are 2 main arguments for using crape myrtle in the landscape. They offer long periods of summer bloom and you can pick the size of crape myrtle that fits exactly into the space or gap that exists in your landscape. Among the colors to choose from are lavender, pink, red, and white. Pruning has been de-emphasized as research indicates bloom performance is just as good without heavy pruning each year. Grow crape myrtles as specimen plants or in rows or groupings in full sun. Visit plantanswers.com to view the size and flower color options that exist. The lists also provide information on disease and insect resistance, bark characteristics, and fall leaf color.

**Vitex i**s also called Texas lilac or chaste tree. The deciduous tree will grow to about 25 ft. in full sun. The attractive lavender blooms are produced on stalks that emerge all over the sprawling crown of this especially drought tolerant tree. Butterflies and hummingbirds use vitex as a nectar source. Deer do not eat vitex. Some gardeners avoid using vitex because in some habitats it has been identified as an invasive plant. On the other hand the Texas A&M Agriculture Extension Service has designated vitex as a Texas Superstar because of its attractive bloom, drought tolerance and pest free growth.

**Loquat (Japanese plum**) is an evergreen tree that grows to 25ft tall in sun or shade. Because of its shade tolerance it can be used on the edge of the landscape under the crowns of large shade trees. The well-shaped tree with large leaves also makes a distinctive specimen plant and works well in rows. Loquat bloom occurs in early winter and is not very showy but if the winter is mild, the fruit can make quite an impact. Eat it fresh or in preserves. Loquat fruit is also a favorite food for birds. Production can be high so you may not want to plant loquat on the edge of the driveway where the fruit will fall on the car.

**Mexican plum** is similar to loquat in that it produces a fruit and has shade tolerance but it only grows to about 15ft tall. The bloom in February is short-lived but showy. The fruit is again a favorite of birds but the quantity is not overwhelming and it ripens in late spring. Mexican plum forms a very compact crown that is attractive as a specimen tree and is also attractive to nesting birds such as cardinals and mockingbirds. Mexican plum is very effective when planted in groups to form a thicket that becomes a center of bird activity. Deer do not seem to browse on Mexican plum.

Mexican plum, crape myrtles, and loquat are available at every nursery**, Texas persimmon** is harder to find. You may have to visit a nursery that specializes in native plants or watch for native plant sales. Texas persimmon is a deciduous native tree that grows to about 15 ft. tall on most sites. The sexes are on separate trees so if you have a male there is no fruit. The species resembles Mexican plum but the crown is not as compact and the foliage is more gray-green. Use Texas persimmon as an understory wildlife tree. When the female is loaded with fruit it often appears to be in motion because of the birds. It is especially attractive to golden-fronted woodpeckers in my neighborhood.

**Anaqua** may eventually grow to 35 ft. tall but it is not a fast growing tree. Some gardeners know anaqua as sandpaper tree because of the texture of the leaves. It is evergreen and grows a very dense crown. Anaqua blooms in early summer and produces a sticky yellow fruit in August that is a bird favorite but not a favorite of homeowners trying to keep a patio clean. Deer do not seem to eat anaqua and it is relatively easy to find at area nurseries. Grow it in full sun.

**Mexican olive** is not related to the olives that produce olive oil and fruit for the table. It is called an olive because it does produce a small round fruit every summer that does not rate very high in its noticeability or value as a wildlife food. What you do notice about Mexican olive is the 3 inch white blooms that cover the tree for most of the growing season. Grow Mexican olive in full sun where it may reach 25ft. tall and nearly the same size in diameter. Of all the small trees described, it is the most cold sensitive. In winters where temps reach 24 degrees, the top may die back but existing trees grow back quickly from the roots.

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