**Best Time to Plant Shade Trees**

**Calvin Finch Ph.D.**

**Horticulturist and Director**

**Texas A&M Water Conservation and Technology Center**

This is the best time of the year to plant a new shade tree in your landscape. The newly planted tree will have five or six months to grow a root system before it is challenged by the hot weather.

In addition, some area nurseries have sales on shade trees in stock, and if you plant one of the CPS approved species to shade the west or south side of your home, the utility company will provide a $50 credit on your utility bill for each of two trees. Visit the CPS website for more information and the application.

Live oak is the favorite and most valued tree in terms of property value in Central and South Texas. Once established, it is drought and pest tolerant. Live oak is attractive with sturdy, small leaved, horizontal growth habit. We call it an evergreen, but it does drop its leaves for a brief period every March.

Live oak can be infected with oak wilt. The disease spreads through the interconnected root system. The likelihood of your tree getting oak wilt is small as long as you paint all wounds and pruning cuts, but you may want to pick another species if your neighborhood is dominated by live oak.

Live oak is a long-lived species that grows at a moderate rate. It will survive on poor soils, but it grows fastest and largest on deep soils.

Mexican white oak has a large, less shiny leaf than live oak, but it is also nearly evergreen. It grows faster than live oak and will grow to 50 feet tall. The growth habit is more upright than live oak. Mexican white oak is not susceptible to oak wilt, so it is an especially good choice for a neighborhood dominated by live oak and red oak. The species is drought tolerant.

Texas red oak grows faster than live oak. It is a deciduous oak that drops its leaves every autumn. Some years, an individual red oak can have good fall color. Like live oak, it is drought and pest tolerant. Texas red oak grows to 40 feet tall on most sites. Individual red oaks can get oak wilt.

Cedar elm is a deciduous tree with small leaves that grows at about the same rate as live oak. It is very drought tolerant and largely pest free. On good sites, cedar elm will grow to 60 feet tall. It is more upright than a live oak.

One of cedar elm’s survival mechanisms is to drop its leaves early after a drought summer.

Mexican sycamore has a large leaf with a silvery, hairy bottom. When the wind blows, the flashing leaves are very distinctive. Mexican sycamore grows very fast at about the same rate as Texas red oak. It is deciduous, and the large leaves can cover the ground under the tree when they fall in the autumn.

In addition to the distinctive leaves, Mexican sycamore has a sensuous bark with patterns of gray, silver and brownish that decorates the winter landscape. If you select a sycamore, make sure you obtain a Mexican sycamore. The American sycamore grows fast and is decorative, but it is short lived due to it susceptibility to the disease anthracnose.

Mexican sycamore has a hairy leaf underside, and American sycamore has a smooth underside. Mexican sycamore grows to 60 feet tall.

Dig the hole for your new shade tree to the same depth as the root ball and 2-3 times as wide. There is no long-term advantage to adding growth stimulator or organic material to the planting hole. Your tree is perfectly capable of growing in our native soils and must become established as quickly as possible.

Put mulch over the root ball on the surface of the ground to keep sod from encroaching on the tree and to reduce evaporation. Water-in the tree generously. Filling the planting hole to the brim with water at planting helps eliminate air pockets and also moistens the surrounding soil so the roots can move out quickly. Re-water the tree every time the soil dries under the mulch. It may be every two weeks for the first winter and every week over the first summer.

Fertilize every spring by spreading a cup of lawn fertilizer per inch of tree diameter in the area around the root ball.

One of the hardest decisions to make is to decide how large of a specimen you should purchase. Instant shade is desirable, but large trees are expensive.

My recommendation is that you opt for a moderate-sized specimen in a 10-15 gallon container. It is easier to dig a moderate-sized hole than a large one. Often times, the smaller trees adjust to the transplant more quickly, with the result that it outgrows the larger specimen.

Other tree species that make good shade trees for Central and South Texas are chinkapin oak, bur oak, Chinese pistache, Mexican sycamore and Montezuma cypress. Visit the plantanswers.com archive to find out why I recommend that you think twice before planting Arizona ash, pecan, cottonwood, Chinaberry, hackberry and American sycamore.