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 and habitat for wildlife such as birds and butterflies in the landscape. 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 bloom in many colors and you can pick the size of tree (or shrub) that fits exactly into the space or gap that exists in your landscape. Pruning has been de-emphasized as research indicates bloom performance is just as good without heavy pruning each year. This summer the Texas AgriLife Extension Service has designated the Basham’s Party Pink crape myrtle as a Texas Superstar. Reaching 30ft. tall on some sites it has been a top performer for several decades. 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. Your favorite nursery probably posts the same information at their facility. The lists also provide information on disease and insect resistance, bark characteristics, and fall leaf color.

**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 has white blooms in early summer and produces a sticky yellow fruit in August that is a bird favorite but not a favorite of shopkeepers at LaVillita and other places that have large specimens. Anaqua grows large enough and is desirable enough as a small shade tree that CPS includes the species in its shade tree rebate program. Deer do not seem to eat anaqua and it is relatively easy to find at area nurseries. Grow it in full sun.

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