

Summit's Shade Tree Advisory Committee Gives Advice on Selecting the Right Tree for Your Property

“When is the best time to plant a tree?”

The answer: “Twenty years ago.

The second-best time? Today.”

...Old Proverb

Spring rains and the green lushness they bring have almost made us forget the once-in-a-century storm we endured last fall and the devastation it wreaked on Summit’s urban forest. Now is the perfect time to replace lost trees. Trees planted during the Spring growing season have lots of time to spread their roots, store nourishment and settle in before the harsh winter returns. If you are thinking about planting a tree on your property, you will find the following guidance from Summit’s Shade Tree Advisory Committee helpful.

There are many factors to consider when choosing a tree like growth pattern, pest resistance, seasonal interest, and even the reason for planting (privacy, windbreak, shade). If your eyes are glazed already, just remember the three “L’s” of tree planting: **Location, Look and Learning.**

Location: Where are you thinking about putting the tree? Is it windy? Is it a slope? How much light does it get – is it shady? Is it close to the house? How much water does it get – will it be hard to water? Is it close to the driveway? Is it close to the road? Are there any utility poles or wires nearby? What is the soil like? Summit is in USDA Zone 6A; a tree categorized for zone 8 or 9 will likely die in our cold winters. When you shop for trees, the tag will typically identify the zone where it grows best; it usually also will identify other site-related information like whether the tree needs to be planted in “Full Sun” or “Shade” and how much water it needs – if the information is not on the tag, you should be able to ask the nursery person for guidance. Seems obvious, but you would be surprised how many of us overlook thinking about the spot where the tree will go.

Look: There are lots of ways to get a sense for how a tree looks. Walk around your neighborhood and notice which trees catch your eye. What is it about the tree that holds your interest? Is it the shape of the leaves? Is it the color of the foliage in the Fall? Is it the timing, size or color of its flowers? Walk around a nursery, where the trees are identified. Here in Summit, we can also visit the Reeves-Reed Arboretum or our Village Green,



both of which contain many different types of trees at different stages of maturity. This way you can get a sense for how the tree will look when it is fully grown. Before you take a new tree home, make sure you know the fully grown sizing for the tree you are considering – often the small tree that looks perfect upon planting soon turns into a problem situation.

Learning: Once you have an idea of the type of tree that you like, learn about it. What kind of tree is it – evergreen or deciduous (...will it lose its leaves in the Fall)? When the tree is in leaf, does its canopy spread, does it weep or does it grow in a pyramidal or rounded shape? Do the leaves block sunlight or filter it? How much work will it be – does it need lots of pruning to keep its shape or is it low maintenance? Is it pet resistant (dogs are a fact of life in Summit) or pest resistant? Is it susceptible to pollution? How deep or wide do its roots grow? How much water will it need? Are there different varieties that have different characteristics? If a particular characteristic is important to you, learn which named varieties will give you the results that you want: cultivar names identify subtle differences. If you do your homework, you will be happier and more confident as the tree grows in your yard.

For questions about trees, you can contact Rutgers Master Gardeners of Union County at (908) 654-9852. In fact, Rutgers has many helpful [fact sheets on trees and shrubs](#) including:

- [FS376](#) Transplanting Trees and Shrubs
- [FS031](#) How to Fertilize Shade Trees
- [FS1006](#) Trees and Utilities
- [FS099](#) Mulching Trees and Shrubs
- [FS019](#) How to Hire a Tree Care Professional
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Two other excellent resources are the [Arbor Day Foundation](#) and Summit's [Reeves-Reed Arboretum](#).

Finally, learn from the collective wisdom of the members of Summit's Shade Tree Advisory Committee, which includes the City Arborist, the Horticulture Director at Reeves-Reed Arboretum, the Director of Public Works, certified Master Gardeners and Summit residents who actively garden. Based on our collective experience, we have generated the following cheat lists:



Trees to stay away from planting in Summit because they have not done well in our area (they are highly susceptible to disease and/or not native):

- Ash (borers)
- Pears
- Austrian Pine
- Hemlocks
- Norway Maple (super-invasive)
- Mimosa: (super-invasive)
- Mountain Ash (too far north)

Trees to plant in Summit because they thrive in our area:

- Red Maples (tough as nails and provide beauty and color)
- Dogwoods (single trunk or multi-trunk varieties provide lacey, dappled shade)
- Sugar Maples (but not too close to the sidewalk)
- Littleleaf Lindens (fast growing and elegant)

You can help put the storm further behind us by planting a tree this Spring. While the particular tree that you select will be a very personal decision, we hope that these basic steps to the process will help you find the right tree for your property that you and your family will enjoy for years to come.

By Christina Amundson and John Kilby, Summit Shade Tree Advisory Committee

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