

Autumn Blaze Maple:

The Next Tree Disaster Waiting To Happen?

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As an old-timer in our industry, I remember the burn piles and mountains of elm wood chips that resulted from Dutch Elm disease in the 1970s and '80s. We now face the same prospect again as Emerald Ash Borer (EAB) approaches Minnesota, and the odds of stopping EAB look pretty low. EAB is likely to devastate the 800 million black ash in our northern forests and the 20 million black, green and white ash in our urban forests. As a state, we are much better prepared for EAB than we were for Dutch Elm disease, but what we are planning for is how to first avoid, then minimize, and finally manage the devastation. Michigan's ash resource has been trashed by EAB, and the bug is spreading slowly but steadily through natural means and quickly and unpredictably through movement of infested firewood and other pathways. There is a lot of interesting research going on, but there doesn't seem to be a silver bullet for EAB.

The mistake we made in the '70s and '80s as an industry was to produce, sell and plant the huge quantities of ash that are now at risk. Yes, we were just responding to market pressures to provide trees that were tough as nails, fast-growing and adaptable to many soils and sites. But we are as much to blame as our buying public for putting that many of our eggs in one basket and overplanting ash as an elm replacement in the urban forest. After the elm debacle, most responsible city foresters implemented the "30, 20, 10" policy of no more than 30% trees from one family, 20% from one genus or 10% of any one species. However, private growers, designers and contractors were under no such obligation, and growers responded to the demand with lots of ash in their programs. My company planted roughly 25% ash for several years in the late '70s, and our ash sales were brisk. The City of Minneapolis has avoided planting ash for the past few years, but ash still represents

greater than 20% of their tree inventory. Many other cities have higher percentages of ash.

It would be a serious mistake to preemptively remove healthy ash from our cities, since they are great street trees with relatively few problems to date. However, as city foresters draw up annual removal budgets, they should preferentially remove declining or hazardous ash trees, along with the worst individuals of other species. Both before and after EAB arrives, we need to be prepared to replace declin-

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ing and hazardous trees after they are identified and removed. Again we need trees that are tough as nails, fast-growing and adaptable to many soils and sites.

The hottest tree in our markets since EAB was discovered is the Autumn Blaze Maple. This is a GREAT tree, with lots of endearing qualities. It is almost as fast-growing as silver maple, fully hardy in the Twin Cities and not particular as to soil type or site. Fall color of Autumn Blaze is great, and it is a much more organized tree structurally than is Silver Maple. The grower community responded to this demand for Autumn Blaze maple by planting tens of thousands of liners and ramping up production. Even with the down housing market and horrible nursery sales of the last year or two, Autumn Blaze is still selling fairly well. And yet, Autumn Blaze is basically a Silver Maple with good fall color. I think we will have the same future problems with erupting roots as with silvers and I have seen a lot of Autumn Blaze maples that were poorly

pruned either on the nursery or in the landscape or both, creating structural problems and resulting in susceptibility to wind, snow and ice breakage.

So, Autumn Blaze maple is a great tree with a few typical tree problems.

The far greater issue is the growing preponderance of this tree in nurseries, garden centers and landscapes. If cities are planting 10% Autumn Blaze maple and growers, designers and contractors are pushing this tree as the "no-brainer" solution to all tree problems, we're heading

down the same path we followed with elm a century ago and ash thirty years ago. As professionals, we have an obligation to advise our customers about the best solutions to their problems and I believe we are failing to do that consistently. My company grows Autumn Blaze maple, but in much smaller numbers than many others. We have a wide variety of wonderful shade trees avail-

able, including many that are native to Minnesota. I think we as an industry should move away from the AB-focused mindset we now have and that we put forward to our customers. Green industry professionals should be selling their expertise along with their trees, and pointing customers toward the diverse palette of tree options we already carry. Some of those options require good drainage, or protected sites or acid soils. Isn't that the kind of expertise we should be offering as a value-added service to separate us from the big boxes?

If this article comes across as a diatribe, I have accomplished my purpose. My title is provocative because this issue is very real. I have no idea if we will ever have a disease, insect or other type of problem with Autumn Blaze maple. I certainly hope not. But the more of them we plant, and the less diversity we design, sell and plant for our customers, the greater chance we have of creating an environment ripe for disaster.