

What species of trees are you planting?



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Being a "tree person," I have always noticed trees — to the point of obsession at times (at least according to my friends). And I'm often amazed at what people will do to their trees in the name of ... maintenance? ...art? ...goodness knows what?

But there are other things I notice as well, including hazardous trees, to the point where there are some places I won't park even my old beat-up pickup.

I also notice tree species — what is being planted and where. In street tree situations I have noticed that many communities seem to pick a few preferences and stick to them. In our part of the world, maples, ashes and honeylocusts are favorites, with callery pears and crabapples running close behind.

There are a couple of problems with planting monocultures or a narrow range of tree species. One is that if a specific pest or disease strikes a narrow species range, it can drive up the cost of maintenance of the trees, even threaten the survival of large numbers of them because the problem spreads so easily from tree to tree. Dutch elm disease is a perfect example since it virtually wiped out American elms in many communities.

The other concern that I have with planting a limited number of tree species, and it is not one which I have ever really heard discussed, is the continual expansion of our suburban areas (let's include developments including golf courses in this), particularly into formerly forested areas.

Very often, large tracts of land are essentially denuded of the variety of native trees and replanted with a limited and often unimaginative selection of species. This is not necessarily any one person's fault, since often these decisions are made by people who aren't all that familiar with

trees. Dealing with a tree nursery with a limited selection of choices or trying to maximize the number of trees by buying what is most common and least expensive are not unreasonable decisions; just short-sighted.

There are a lot of different species out there which are valuable landscape trees. Granted, not all native species will be appropriate to all aspects of a newly developed area. But I think it's important to begin thinking about this. I am not trumpeting using only native species BUT — there are species out there that we are not seeing being planted nor are they being left to reproduce in the landscape.

In my area in particular I am thinking of the hickories. They tend to be scarce in nurseries (but they are out there) and, with their fruits, are certainly not appropriate for street situations. But there are places where they can and should be considered, including park areas, natural edges and other places where maintenance levels tend to be lower.

You could make quite a list of neglected but attractive species that we will miss if we continue to limit our choices in the landscape. Sourwood, black gum (or tupelo) or sassafras are some of my personal favorites. And all have their place.

For those of you who do some tree planting, and where you have some choice in species selection, consider what is native to your area and not being planted. The architectural characteristics, fall color, bark and leaf textures and the wildlife use of these species are all valuable additions to the landscape. If you aren't sure, ask your extension agent what they would suggest and start asking the nursery you deal with for the species you want. If they can't get it, there are other nurseries that can.

This does take some extra effort on your part, but not a lot and it is well worth it. Internet searches are also very useful, as long as the source of the planting stock is from a close hardiness zone and elevation.

We aren't going to fall off the edge of the earth if you don't, but if you at least try, I give you permission to call yourself "visionary." **LM**

Agree/Disagree? Comments/Questions? Column Suggestions? Let Nancy Stairs know at 440/891-2623. Fax: 440/891-2675. E-Mail: nstairs@advanstar.com