

## Choose a Tree for the Site, Not a Site for the Tree

A friend of mine, Robert Edmonson, of the Texas Forest Service is an expert not only on oak wilt, but also on planting and growing native trees and shrubs. One of the messages he likes to convey to people is to “choose a tree for the site, not a site for the tree”.

At first this might not make sense to you, it may seem like two ways to say the same thing, but Robert explains it this way. Many people go to a nursery and look over the available trees and shrubs, find something they like, then take it home and then start looking for a place to plant it. But often the tree that they bought is unsuitable for the site they chose, and the outcome is usually poor.

They would have better luck if they first chose a site where they want a tree and assess the characteristics of that site (space, sunny or shady, deep soil or shallow), and then go find a tree that grows well in that type of environment. Just because you have decided that you want a “such and such tree” because your sister or a guy down the block has one does not mean that you have a place where it will grow.

I heard a story about a neighbor down the road who saw cypress trees growing down the road from his house so he bought some and they promptly died. Then he noticed there were sycamores down the road too, so he bought some and tried them—with the same result. The problem was that cypress and sycamores are trees that grow in riparian areas with deep soil and some moisture, but the neighbor lived on top of a nearby hill with shallow, rocky soil.

The point Robert tries to make is to know the kind of environment a tree or shrub likes to grow in and then only buy species that are compatible with the kind of sites you have available. In fact that advice applies to perennials and wildflowers as well.

I can tell you from personal experience that the same species growing even in close proximity to one another can exhibit very different growth characteristics. Soon after we moved into our house we planted a possumhaw out in full sun. It grew slowly and had unhealthy-looking leaves, but it did produce berries. After a few years we found volunteer possumhaws growing in various places under mature trees in the yard and we now have a half dozen of the shrubs, all much larger and healthier than the original.

We have a number of mature blackjack oaks and post oaks growing around the yard, and we have quite a few volunteers of both species, either from root sprouts or acorns. Most are growing under larger mature trees and are healthy, but growing slowly. But two blackjacks growing in a fairly open space are much larger and growing faster than any growing in the shade. It is hard to find blackjack oaks for sale in nurseries because

they are hard to grow from acorns into healthy trees. I have planted and caged several small blackjacks over the years only to watch them grow very, very slowly.

Several years ago I planted and caged several fairly similar-sized cedar elms, and watered them regularly for the first three years. Most of them made beautiful trees, but two are alive and growing, but very slowly, and don't appear to be very healthy.

The point of these examples is that even when we do pay attention to the environment and plant species known to grow in a certain environment, success is not always assured. So to improve our success rate, it is important to know the growth requirements of trees and shrubs and to only buy species that fit the sites we have available.

The best way to find the growth characteristics of native trees and shrubs is to go to the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center website, [www.wildflower.org/plants/](http://www.wildflower.org/plants/). What you learn there will not guarantee you will have 100% success with new plantings, but it will make sure you won't waste your money trying to plant a cypress or a buttonbush or a pecan on a rocky hilltop.

Until next time...

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