

Match a new tree to its place



Commentary: By Dick Reid

Now is the time of year to start planning for your yard and garden, including the overall landscaping.

Along with the placement of flower beds and ornamental shrubs, also think about trees. Is it time to put in a new tree or to replace one that is in poor condition, or do you have a new home with a yard that is a clean slate?

Spring is the best time to plant a tree, because soil moisture is at its peak after winter rains or snowmelt have soaked in. In the Lewiston-Clarkston Valley, March and April are the best tree planting months, while on the Palouse or Camas Prairie, April or early May are best.

First, consider how the new tree will function in the overall landscape plan for the property. Do you want it to grow into a specimen tree, one that has showy flowers or leaf color that is impressive in the yard? Or do you want a tree that will shade the home in the summer or block cold winds in winter? Or maybe you want a tree that will enhance wildlife habitat by providing food or nesting cover.

Think about how big the tree might get and how fast it will grow. You don't want to plant a potentially large, fast-growing tree like a sycamore close to the house or a tree that will grow 50 or 60 feet tall under a utility line. When you select your tree, there should be a tag attached that tells you what kind of tree it is and how big it will get.

Another consideration is whether or not your neighborhood has covenants that restrict the type of tree or the size allowed. Some may limit trees to a maximum height of 20 or 30 feet to protect views, while others may forbid trees that are considered a nuisance.

Broadleaved, deciduous trees usually make the best specimen trees. One type that grows well locally is the red maple. There are many cultivars of red maple that provide choices of fall color, tree shape and size. If you have the room and are looking for a tree that will grow quite large, several oaks fit this category, as do other maples.

Flowering dogwood and redbud are small trees that provide a spring show as well as wildlife food. They should be planted in partial shade for best results, as that will mimic their natural habitat in Eastern woodlands. Varieties of flowering crabapple also provide a spring show in a small area, as do ornamental plums and hawthorn trees.

If you need a windbreak, a row of western juniper, Colorado blue spruce, or arborvitae will do the job, although deer love arborvitae. Even a well-placed single tree of one of these species can help with



utility bills. If there are a lot of deer in your neighborhood, western juniper or spruce might be the safest bet. On a large property, a three-row windbreak might consist of a row of junipers backed up by ponderosa pine, which will grow taller, and fronted by a dense shrub such as wild rose. This arrangement is excellent for wildlife as well.

In researching which tree to plant, you will find information on the type of soil and environmental conditions each species might prefer. One type of tree may need a deep, well-drained soil while another may thrive in poor soil and be drought tolerant. Some trees do best in full sun, while others need full or partial shade. To keep from putting a valuable - and expensive - tree in the wrong location and wrong type of soil, it is a good idea to get a soil test which will tell you the type of soil and if there are any nutrient deficiencies. County extension offices can provide kits for sampling and directions for submitting the sample for testing by a university laboratory and the cost involved.

To learn about any tree, discuss it with a nursery, check it out online by doing an Internet search, or contact your county extension office. In Asotin County, you may contact the Asotin County Master Gardeners at (509) 243-2034, and in Nez Perce County the extension office is at (208) 799-3096.

There is more to planting a tree than merely sticking a seedling or sapling in the ground green side up. However, there are plenty of resources to help you find the best tree for the location and purpose desired. The right tree in the right place will provide years of enjoyment.

Reid is a retired forester and Asotin County Master Gardener and has participated in the Society of American Foresters Urban Forestry Working Group. He lives in Clarkston.

Published in the Lewiston-Morning Tribune on February 9, 2011.