

What kind of Tree?



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Tree Times

As a consulting arborist who has visited properties and talked to folks about their trees for decades now, I hear the same questions over and over. One of them is *"What can I plant that will grow fast and get shade on my roof (or over my patio) as soon as possible?"* And my answer is fairly standard as well. I have to start at the beginning and explain that as a generality, fast-growing trees are typically weak-fibered trees and also not very long lived. Weak wood means that they are more prone to breakage and mechanical failures. By the time they get large enough to provide a decent amount of shade they are very often on their way out. The ubiquitous Bradford Pear is an example of this idea. People like the Bradford because of its dense green canopy and its glorious spring flowering. And a row of them does make a nice visual screen . . . for a while. But there is a serious downside if longevity is one requirement. One of their main assets also becomes over time a progressive liability. That beautiful and busy dense canopy with its tight-forked superfluous branching makes that canopy especially vulnerable to loading and weather events. It is not uncommon to see half of a pear ripped out and gone after rain and wind. With many landscapers, the Bradford is losing favor for these very reasons. Many folks like willows because they are known to be graceful and fast growing. But they don't last long. A fifteen year old willow is almost a

geriatric case that is prone to repetitive breakage. While Redbuds are still highly regarded for their spring and fall color in a landscape, they too can eventually be problematic with a tendency to develop cankered areas on their trunks, scaffolding and forks that indicators of early issues. Almost half the mature redbuds that I see are candidates for mechanical support of some kind or another.



What about maples? I like maples; they can be good landscape trees and achieve a nice size. However as youngsters in full sun, they may need protection from sun scald, a phenomenon that causes the bark to crack and slough away. The only maple I would not recommend is the Silver Leaf Maple (*Acer saccharinum*), which as time passes typically becomes prone to an entire catalog of problems. The Silver Leaf is not commonly found in many nurseries for that reason. But when taking all maples as a genus, they seem also to be

more prone to girdling root syndrome. Girdling roots are not unlike the effect of a pot-bound plant in which the roots do not grow radially outward but instead tend to encircle the trunk and over time become constrictive. Especially in clay soil, correct planting procedures can help to reduce this tendency.

Well, you say, this all sounds pretty negative. What is a good tree to plant that's going to be large and provide shade for my patio. Oaks are said to be too slow growing. I can't wait that long. Well, that depends. If they're started at the right time of year (mid to late fall in the Mid-South) and started in the right way, the clay soil they will likely be growing in can offer a nutritional benefit. While clay may have a generally bad rep, it is also usually high in nutrient holding capacity (cation exchange). Started well, a carefully selected single stem native oak may grow faster than you think and become a shade producer in eight to ten years with the expectation of just getting better and better as time goes on. Then for color and durability, most crape myrtles are great. For privacy, screening and noise barriers, wax myrtles and Chinese weeping privet (*Ligustrum Sinense Pendula*) works very well. But you may need some lateral room for the privet to grow.

Somewhere after mid-October and the end of summer heat is optimum planting time. Happy digging.

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