
Fast-growing trees a snap to start, often end with bang

By Fred Morgan

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As a consulting arborist, 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?" My answer is fairly standard as well.

I have to start at the beginning and explain that fast-growing trees are generally weak-fibered trees and not very long lived. Weak wood means they are 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. People like the Bradford because of its dense green canopy and its glorious spring flowering. A row of them does make a nice visual screen -- for a while.

One of their main assets also becomes over time a progressive liability. That beautiful and busy dense canopy with its tightly forked branching makes that canopy especially vulnerable to weather events. It is not uncommon to see half of a pear tree ripped out and gone after rain and wind. With many landscapers, the Bradford is losing favor for this reason.

Many folks like willows because they are known to be graceful and fast growing. But they don't last long. A 15-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, they, too, can eventually be problematic with a tendency to develop cankered areas on their trunks, scaffolding and forks that are early indicators of 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.

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, when the roots do not grow radially outward, but instead tend to encircle the trunk and become constrictive. Especially in clay soil, correct planting procedures can help to reduce this tendency.

What is a good tree to plant that will be large and provide shade for the patio? Oaks are said to be too slow-growing. Well, that depends. If they're started at the right time of year (mid- to late fall in the Mid-South) and in the right way, the clay soil can offer a nutritional benefit. While clay may have a generally bad rep, it is also usually high in nutrient- holding capacity.

Started well, a carefully selected single stem native oak may grow faster than you think and become a shade producer in eight to 10 years, with the expectation of getting better and better as time goes on.

For color and durability, most crape myrtles are great.

For privacy, screening and noise barriers, wax myrtles and Chinese weeping privet (*Ligustrum Sinense Pendula*) work very well. But you may need some lateral room for the privet to grow.

Some time after mid-October at the end of summer heat, it's optimum planting time.

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