

Oaks do well in our clay, but give them lots of time

By Fred Morgan

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The other day when I looked at the red oaks along the rails of my porch, I suddenly thought that they'd gotten amazingly larger.

I was sure of it a few days later when I accidentally found a photo made in the early '90s. It was kind of like finding an old photo of your kids. Whoa!

Oaks are supposed to be slow-growing trees, and in many ways that's true when compared to some other types. But in clay soil, especially when they start right, they grow faster than you might think.

Not infrequently, I get questions from homeowners about what should be planted in a particular spot to produce shade; something that is going to "get big," cool the house and give the home a stately look.

Plant an oak, or several if you have room. Planted correctly and at the right time, they'll usually do well in this area. They actually like the clay that typically -- and in some ways justifiably -- gets such a bad rap here.

Clay soil is usually good about one thing -- holding nutrients well.

"But it'll take a lifetime," they'll say. "I want something fast!" And that leads me to one of my standard spiels: "Maybe, but maybe not. How long are you planning to be on the property?"

An important thing to remember is that the downside of fast growth is a weak and short-lived tree.

I visit properties -- beautiful treed sites -- where a proposed new house footprint has already been staked out. I walk it with the owners, seeing clearly the subtle irrepressible smile of anticipation on their faces. Almost invariably they have in mind a picture of what it's all going to look like when it is done. And so often it doesn't end up looking that way at all.

What they want instantly is what takes some time to get. Very often they have a

photograph or an image in their head of some home in an idyllic, shaded neighborhood. But somebody forgot to tell them that most of the time, the trees on that model property grew up there with the home site.

Very large, mature oaks are picky, very picky, about what goes on around their feet. In short, they don't like to be excessively disturbed after they've grown to adulthood.

Now that's not to say the vision is impossible to achieve; only that it takes more commitment. It takes informed planning and a willingness to modify that plan when necessary. It also takes diligent and unrelenting policing during the construction period and meticulous after-care.

Even then, after all that, the entire venture can still be a crap-shoot when you seek to do a fast end-run around the "time factor."

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