Placement of trees in the landscape is important

Oklahoma’s Arbor Week was just last week, and it gave us an opportunity to celebrate the beauty of trees and recognize their importance in our daily lives. Now let’s talk about the importance of tree placement in the landscape.

Because trees perform a variety of functions and are a major component of structure in a landscape, placement is important. Trees give architectural form and organization to space. They are planted to provide shade for the home, which can cut down on utility bills. Trees also provide shade for your outdoor gathering spaces. In Oklahoma, we know the importance of shade. In addition, trees and shrubs reduce noise and air pollution and make your home more attractive and valuable.

With that in mind, trees should not be randomly placed around the property, but should be placed with purpose and intent.

From an aesthetic point of view, we can think of planting trees as single specimens, in groups or in mass. The specimen tree usually becomes a feature or focal point of the landscape. It is set off from other trees and plant materials by unique spacing, form, color and/or texture.

In group plantings, the trees as a unit become the landscape feature. Groupings typically are the same species. If you choose to do a group planting, don’t mix contrasting forms.

In mass plantings, individual trees lose identity and appear as one larger unit in the design. A group planting may grow into a mass planting as trees mature.

Whatever method you choose to plant trees, careful site selection is important to ensure the long-term health of the tree, as well as to ensure safety within the landscape. Trees grow to very large sizes, both above ground and below, and you need to consider the space available in both of these locations when placing a tree. Keep in mind utility lines, building foundations and paved surfaces.

Small trees, reaching a mature height of less than 25 feet, should be placed a minimum of 20 feet from overhead lines. Increase this distance to at least 35 feet for trees that reach 30 feet to 50 feet. For large trees maturing over 50 feet, the minimum spacing from power lines is 45 feet.

Gardeners also will want to consider the utility lines below ground. Before deciding on where to locate a tree, call a utility locating company to have the utility lines marked on your property. Don’t plant a tree within 10 feet of underground utility lines.
Now consider a tree’s placement relative to buildings. A tree’s root system can extend two to three times beyond the width of the canopy, so plenty of underground space is needed. A good rule is to set a tree at a distance from the building that is equal to or greater than half of the tree’s mature width.

We also want to consider pavement, fences, and other structures. To help prevent pavement from buckling above the roots, leave a minimum of 3 feet obstacle free on all sides of the tree. Leave 5 feet or more between a paved surface and a tree.

A few additional things to consider when placing a tree in the landscape are to avoid:

- Blocking windows or desirable views.
- Blocking traffic signs or views around corners.
- Shading vegetable or flower gardens.
- Encroaching on your neighbor’s property.

Consult a landscape architect or other qualified professional if you need assistance in planning your landscape.

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