Tree Planting for Conservation

There are many reasons to plant trees. Some reasons that typically come to mind are for landscape design, privacy, or future shade. All things considered, trees are planted for the benefits they provide and the many purposes they serve—visually, psychologically, economically and biologically. And while it’s true we value trees for varying reasons, more and more, we are planting with conservation in mind.

Trees are real blessings in the heat of our Texas summers. They absorb heat as they transpire, reduce solar radiation and cut down on reflection and help minimize extreme surface temperatures. Deciduous trees will cool your home in summer and, after leaf drop, allow for the sun’s rays to enter and warm your home in winter. This is particularly effective if solar panels are used to offset utility costs in winter. Shade from trees can reduce room temperatures in poorly insulated houses by as much as 20°F in summer (Deering 1955) and bare ground surface temperatures can cool an average of 35°F in five minutes after being shaded (Deering and Brooks 1953).

When properly selected, placed and maintained, the right tree in the right place can cut down on noise levels, purify the air, control flooding and erosion and act as windbreaks, to channel airflow and block airborne particulates and pollutants which, unfortunately, threaten our health and the vigor of vegetation as well when absorbed on plant surfaces. Though trees take in carbon dioxide and produce oxygen, in larger cities on calm days oxygen is still consumed at a much faster rate than can be produced by green plants. Away from congested cities, the gas exchange rates of trees filtering the air are much more successful (Broecker 1970). This information tells us not only must we protect our current level of green cover, but more city and urban plantings would prove beneficial (1).

With the rising costs of food prices, there is a renewed interest in vegetable gardening, so while you’re introducing a few new vegetables, consider planting from a wide variety of fruit and nut trees for food production as well. There is considerable satisfaction in harvesting and eating as a result of your own labors, and you’ll find the taste much better, too. And don’t rake all those leaves! They are a valuable organic crop and will save you money on composting, mulch and fertilizer. So, consider harvesting your leaves in fall along with some peelings from your garden vegetables for a rich layer of organic matter for next season’s plantings.

One last thing: There are reasons native trees and some naturalized trees are preferred. Simply, these varieties are drought and heat tolerant, require less resources for survival, and can exist and flourish in our soils which vary from rocky or alkaline with a high ph, to clay in Zone 8 which includes the Austin area. So steer away from the water guzzling, weak-wooded trees that brown out in mid-summer or litter with premature leaf drop. Just because the box stores push them at us does not mean we should take them. If planting is in your future, consider the chinquapin, lacey, bur, live or Mexican white oak, the lacebark elm or cedar elm, the Carolina cherry laurel, crape myrtles (particularly the Natchez or new varieties of reds), Texas pistache, pecan, Mexican buckeye, or the dozens of other wonderful seasonal performers. Plan a day at your local nursery and see for yourself the wide variety of available fruit, ornamental and shade trees which arrive seasonally.

We live in a disposable, compact society and have forgotten the old adage of “waste not, want not.” In our busy lifestyles, we seem to care little for what doesn’t directly affect us. But good stewardship calls us to become connected—to conserve and replenish our resources wisely. Not only can we do great things in small spaces, but most often the byproducts of what we use can be cyclically returned back into the foundations of the very things which sustain us.

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(1)*Arboriculture, Care of Trees, Shrubs and Vines in the Landscape*. Harris.