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For more information,
contact: Jesse Gilmore
Horticulture Agent, Wildcat Extension District
jr637@ksu.edu, (620) 724-8233

Selection Is the First Step to Healthy Trees

The city of Oswego is having a tree sale on May 1st, and in honor of that, the next three weeks will be on the topic of tree establishment. There are 10 steps to getting a tree established, and today we will cover tree selection. Before even buying the tree, there are things to look for that will maximize the life of the tree. The number one mistake people make when getting a new tree is not fitting the mature size of the tree to the location. The height and spread of the full-sized tree must not be crowded by buildings, power lines, or other trees if the desired tree is to thrive in your landscape with minimal maintenance. Researching tree sizes will give you an idea of the space each tree will need and help you determine the best fit for your current situation.

The other major consideration when looking at the tree is the tree's general structure. Excurrent trees are trees with strong central leaders and branches growing outwards horizontally, while decurrent trees have multiple leading stems and many forks. A decurrent tree in a species that is traditionally excurrent will have structural issues at the place where the main leaders diverge. Most trees grow excurrently, so look for a strong central leader growing straight up. If the tree in front of you has multiple vertical leaders, one should be pruned out early to train the remaining leader. Keep in mind that some trees default to decurrent growth – these should not be forced into one strong central leader, but you should pay close attention to the forking in the tree across its life. If the tree is traditionally decurrent, looking for a specimen where the leaders diverge higher off the ground will minimize potential structural issues across the tree's life.

Always opt for native trees whenever possible, especially if the tree is native to the central Midwest, but be cognizant of severe pests for each species. Even native trees can suffer when a new pest is introduced from abroad. In general, native trees will be more resistant to drought, cold, disease and insects than foreign trees. Some trees are grotesquely overplanted in different regions – take caution when choosing a tree, you see everywhere. Monoculture is frowned upon agronomy, and horticulture is no different. If a new pest is introduced and tree diversity is too low, entire stands of trees can be wiped out, as they were with Dutch elm disease, emerald ash

borer, and chestnut blight. By planting underutilized trees, you not only get a conversation piece in your landscape, but also makes your community landscape more resilient to outside pressures.

With all of these important tree characteristics, it can be overwhelming trying to find a good tree for your landscape. Keeping size in mind, while you shouldn't try forcing a square peg into a round hole - buy what you like! Trees are a long-term investment, and the more enjoyment your new tree can bring you, the better. Your local extension agent can help you find the best fit for your landscape based upon your wants and needs. For a list of recommended trees and hidden gem species, contact your local extension office.

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