

Tips on the Location and Maintenance of Small Trees

by Mark L. Johnson, MLA, ASLA

It is unlikely that traveling botanists who have discovered plants in exotic places thought, “here is a plant that will look great at my home if I can fertilize it a lot, spray for pests or funguses often, keep it trimmed in an unnatural habit, prune it severely to maintain an abnormal size, or deadhead the spent flowers because it doesn’t bloom enough”. Of course, not every “discovered” plant species has enough positive qualities to endear them to the general public. So, commercial horticulturists are constantly searching for easily maintained plants with beautiful blooms or foliage. The challenge for the property owner is knowing whether that attractive plant will work on their site.

A Landscape Architect would normally search for an appropriate plant for the specific setting, instead of locating a high-maintenance species or variety in an inappropriate location. The landscape architect searches for plants that will meet his or her design intentions when they are mature, instead of locating them based on their immature state, straight from the nursery in a 3-gallon or 15-gallon container. If this concept is followed, pruning should be reserved for selective removal of individual diseased or poorly formed branches.

In recent years, the mutilation of large, tree-like Crape Myrtles has become epidemic. In some circles, severe pruning is thought to increase the blooming ability of these flowering trees. While one may expect a few additional blooms through spent bloom removal, the variety of the tree may have more to do with how it blooms. However, if a property owner is not satisfied with bloom production, simply removing the old bloom should do the trick. The resulting cut should have little impact on the appearance of the small tree as the stem is likely to be only 1/8 to 1/4 in diameter. There is no reason to prune larger stems or branches.

Common reasons for severe pruning are a harsh freeze that causes die-back, infestation by pest, disease, or the plant is located in an area that is confined or too close to a structure. Even in the case of these challenging situations, a tree might be nurtured back to a more natural form with patience and some thoughtful, selective pruning (not hat-racking). It may take months, or even years, to shape the specimen. If the tree (or shrub) is planted too close to other elements for its mature size, relocating or replacing the specimen may be the best solution versus marring the appearance of the plant.

Common pruning practices that should be avoided include:

- Hatracking – excessive branch removal in an attempt to either reduce the size of the tree’s canopy or reshape the canopy.
- Pollarding – the destruction of the natural character of a plant by cutting all the branches to the same location each year.
- Shearing / Trimming – the shaping of a plant to create a formal, unnatural character. Specimen topiaries and formal parterres require this technique. “Lollipopping” trees with this technique should be avoided and thinning should be employed to develop a more natural tree size or shape.
- Topping – cutting major leader or co-leaders of trees. This destroys the natural character of the tree and compromises the structural integrity of the tree.

Unfortunately, one can find these techniques used inappropriately. While some small trees are beyond repair, with a little patience the property owner can develop a landscape that reflects the true nature of the plant specimen that inhabits the site. However, if plants must be replaced, insuring adequate space to the mature spread of trees, shrubs and groundcovers will eliminate future maintenance headaches and costs.

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501 E. Oak Street • Kissimmee, Florida 34744 • Phone (407)931-2225 • Fax (407) 932-1225

www.landdesigns.net • Email signatureone@landdesigns.net