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Shade trees in the home garden:

The decision to purchase a shade tree is making an investment in the future. It requires some careful planning but is ultimately very rewarding for such little effort. There are several factors to consider when choosing a tree: the size of your space, soil conditions, hardiness zone, exposure to road salt, aesthetics, maintenance, the life span of the tree, disease resistance of the tree, and what purpose you expect the tree to serve. For instance, if you would like to attract birds to your yard you may want a variety that produces berries for them to eat. If you just want shade and something low maintenance you may want to avoid a tree that produces seed pods which may become messy. The mature size of the tree must be taken into consideration when planting near foundations or power lines. If you choose a fast growing variety for quick shade remember that faster growing trees, such as poplar, generally have a shorter lifespan and deteriorate more quickly.

Site Requirements:

The size of your yard, your soil conditions, and hardiness zone are the biggest limiting factors in your decision. It is better to make a list of trees that are suitable for your site rather than falling in love with something and finding out the hard way that it wasn't the wisest choice. It is a good idea to have the soil tested to at least find out whether it is acid or alkaline. Tree species vary in their pH requirements. In general most shade trees require well drained soils. There are a few that can tolerate wetter soils such as silver maple and yellow birch. However this doesn't mean standing water. Some trees are able to adapt to periodic flooding but permanently wet soil is a different matter. Once the list is narrowed down with regard to size, soil requirements, and zone, the decision can be based on aesthetic factors and personal preference.

Planting:

The best times to plant shade trees are early spring before the buds swell, and in fall after the leaves change color but before the ground freezes. However, trees can be planted at any point in the growing season if they are well cared for. Generally when you purchase a tree they will be either potted or balled and burlapped and sometimes bare root.

For bare root and potted trees a hole should be dug that is 1' wider and 6" deeper than the root system. Place 6" of loose soil back into the hole, prune off any dead roots and place the tree in the hole. For potted trees cut off any roots that are circling around in the pot to encourage new root growth. Fill the hole around the roots half way with soil and then water to help eliminate air pockets. Continue filling with soil, pressing firmly around the roots with your hands, and water again. Make sure that the tree is no deeper in the ground than it was in the pot. For balled and burlapped trees, the planting hole should be 1-2' wider and the same depth as the root ball. These trees are extremely heavy but it is important not to disturb all that soil so as not to damage fine root hairs. Carefully maneuver the root ball into the hole and straighten the tree. Cut the twine and fold back the metal tabs. Pull

the burlap away from the sides and fold down. This will all be hidden when backfilled and will disintegrate over time, having no effect on the tree's growth. Fill the hole half way with soil and then water to help eliminate air pockets. Continue filling with soil, pressing firmly around the roots with your hands, and water again. Make sure that the tree is no deeper in the ground than it was in the pot.

Fertilizer:

At the time of planting some bonemeal can be worked into the soil. Do not add fertilizer, other than bonemeal, to the planting hole. Alternatively, a diluted solution of water soluble starter fertilizer may be applied after planting to stimulate root growth. Most trees planted in the lawn receive nutrients from lawn fertilization and do not require anything further. Deciduous trees need only to be fertilized every couple of years. Fertilizers can be applied in early spring by spreading around the drip line of the tree. Do not apply fertilizer after the end of June as this encourages growth that doesn't have time to harden off.

Water:

Watering is most important during the first three years while trees are getting rooted in. The amount of water required depends on your soil type. Plants should never be allowed to reach the wilting stage. However, infrequent and deep watering will encourage deeper root growth than frequent, shallow watering. As a general rule newly planted trees will require 10 gallons of water per week for every inch of trunk diameter (measured at 6" above ground). You must take into consideration rainfall amounts and your specific soil type however. Don't water if the soil is still wet. The soil must be allowed to dry out between watering. Permanently wet soil will deprive the roots of oxygen.

Pests and Diseases:

Each species of tree will have its own set of potential pests and resistance or susceptibilities to diseases. Find out when purchasing if your tree has any particular problems to watch out for. Inspect your tree on a regular basis for signs of insects or health issues.

Pruning:

Generally, shade trees don't require a lot of pruning. Basically all that is necessary is the removal of dead or diseased and rubbing or crossed branches. Keep competing leaders, suckers, and water sprouts removed.

Staking:

Not all trees will require staking. Trees that need support in order to maintain an upright position or those on extremely windy, exposed sites may need to be staked. Small trees can be supported with one or two stakes drove into the ground near the tree. Be careful not to damage roots. Use wire with a thick rubber coating where it is in contact with the tree to prevent damage to the bark. Make sure the wire directly around the tree is loose enough that it will not cut into the tree. The wire should be pulled tight enough to firmly hold the tree without causing the trunk to bend.

Larger trees, those with a trunk diameter of three inches or more, should be supported with guy wires. Three stakes are driven into the ground at equal distances around the tree and wires run from the trunk of the tree where the branches start, down to the stakes. Again use heavily coated wire where it is in contact with the tree and make sure that it doesn't cut into the bark.