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TREE LIFESPAN

Plants like all living things have an expected life span, and trees are no exception. Plant genetics play an important role in this, but there are many other factors that can have a bearing on the longevity of a tree. Regardless of the cause, take care when selecting trees so your trees don't all go under at the same time.

Good information concerning the life span of trees is a little hard to find. This is especially true of the arid southwest where many cities are relatively young. Conclusions based on historical observation take time...lots of time. To complicate matters more, our communities were founded on just a few hardy, fast growing species such as the Siberian elm, Ulmus pumila, which is an inferior elm species. Not many superior species were planted until much later so they don't have that long of a track record.

Everybody wants a fast growing tree, but you often hear that fast growing trees are typically short lived trees. There is some truth to this as some fast growing trees have softer wood that is more subject to insect invasion, storm damage and wood decay. Growth rate is actually influenced by many variables other than genetics such as soil, drainage, water, fertility, light, exposure, and many others.

How is growth rate determined? Michael Dirr, horticulturist with the University of Georgia and expert on woody plants, categorizes tree growth rate: slow means the plant grows 12" or less per year; medium is 13 to 24" and fast is 25" or greater. Of course these guidelines would probably be different for West Texas! We have less rainfall, harsher climate extremes, marginal water quality and more difficult soils than does most of Georgia although they are in a drought! A few fast growers include honey locust, silver maple, poplars, Russian olive, willows and some sumacs. Some slow growing trees include cedar elm, Kentucky coffee tree, and bur oak to name a few.

Besides genetics, here are a few factors that can affect tree longevity.

Native Range - if a tree is growing out of its native range, it is very likely to be shorter-lived if there are significant differences in soil, climate, elevation, temperature (especially night temperatures) and other environmental differences that could stress the tree and shorten its life span.

Urban Sites - are difficult sites because the top soil is often scraped off the site during construction to make way for the foundation. After heavy equipment, lots of vehicular and foot traffic and copious amounts of masonry activity have taken place, the soil is often compacted,

soil microbes have died off and the pH is altered. Building construction is usually followed by a final installation of so-called "topsoil" which is spread out over the hard, compacted and chemically altered subsoil. This is not and never will be a good situation. It alters water movement down through the soil profile as well as root growth.

Urban Stress - is a wide variety of cultural practices and conditions that occur in the "care" of the home landscape. These can actually end up harming trees through improper watering practices, fertilizing, pest management and see below:

Pruning - topping, excessive thinning and other poor pruning practices can weaken, disfigure, and allow decay and pests to invade the tree.

Weed management - often damages trees when herbicides are improperly used or the wrong selection is made.

Soil/Root Disturbance - Bringing soil in on top of an existing tree's root system, trenching, digging, construction, flooding, gas leaks, and water leaks are just a few examples of things that can stress a tree.

Poorly Adapted Species - is a sure cause of a short life. Planting a sugar maple, flowering dogwood, a tropical tree or any number of other species in West Texas is a sure way to shorten the life span of that tree.

That brings us back to the life span of trees. We will have to depend mostly on observation. For our purposes we will call trees 25 years and under short lived, 25-50 years medium lived and 50 + years long-lived.

Short-lived tree species include fruitless mulberry, Arizona ash, mimosa, true willow, Siberian elm, catalpa, sycamore, boxelder, chinaberry and Lombardy poplar. Medium lived trees include crabapple, redbud, hackberry, green ash, silver maple, cottonwood, ornamental pears, golden raintree, yaupon holly, crepe myrtle and deodar cedar. Long-lived trees include live, red, bur, and chinquapin oaks, cedar elm, lacebark elm, pecan, Chinese pistache, bald cypress, and Eastern red cedar.

Do not make the mistake of thinking all short lived trees are bad trees. They can be very useful for a period of time providing interest, color, seasonal beauty, shade and protection until slower growing trees begin to make a great impact on the landscape. And do not make the mistake that all fast growing trees are short-lived because that is not always the case.

For a list of recommended trees for our area, contact Texas Cooperative Extension or visit Permian Basin Master Gardener's website at westtexasgardening.org.

COLOR

Get your cool season color in as soon as possible to promote root growth and establishment before cold weather sets in. Try these color transplants for something different.

Cherianthus or Siberian wallflower is a cool season annual that grows about 10 inches tall and is topped with clusters of four petalled flowers in yellow, gold, orange, russet, bronze and purple. Flowers are fragrant and leaves are dark green.

Hardy cyclamen has flowers of red, pink, white, and purple-lavender. The flowers stand up above the foliage facing down with dramatic petals flaring up. The leaves are dark green, heart shaped and have silver patterns in them.

Plant hardy cyclamen in an area protected from hot afternoon sun. Amend the planting site with lots of good, finished compost and keep the site moist for best results.