

Tree selection and planting

Recommendations for optimum planting success

WHEN SELECTING A TREE FOR PLANTING, there are several considerations to take into account. John Kmitta, editor of *Arbor Age*, *Sports Turfs* sister magazine, recently asked Daniel Butler, author of “How to Plant a Tree,” for suggestions to maximize planting success.

Q: What type of planning should be done before planting a tree?

A: The most critical aspect has to be thinking ahead. It’s very easy for enthusiasts to prepare the ground meticulously — clearing the site and getting the soil and protection for the tree just perfect — only to overlook how things will look in 30 or 40 years time. To be fair, the problems usually lie with the client: many want ‘big’ results quickly. When they put in an oak or a redwood, they just can’t picture how quickly this little sapling will completely dominate its surroundings. So I would say one of the most important skills any tree care expert needs is a doctorate in client psychology — the ability to persuade the homeowner, planner or architect of the need to scale things down and, more importantly still, to convince them the new realistic idea was actually their own brainchild.

Q: What recommendations would you make in terms of trees that tolerate urban conditions?

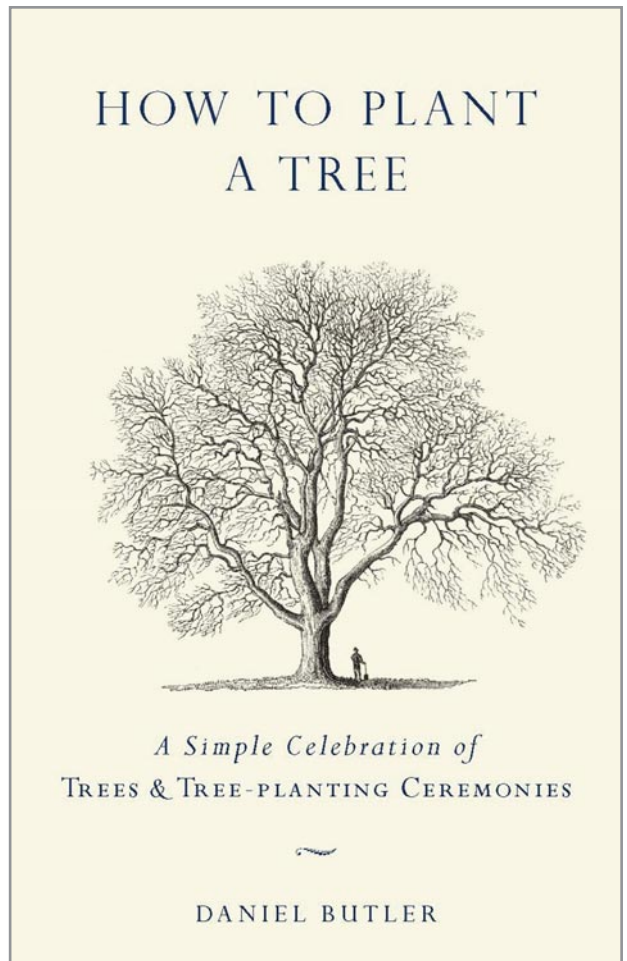
A: Obviously the tree has to be relatively tough, drought and pollution tolerant, but scale is probably

the most critical issue. Big trees take up a huge amount of light and space — and, in time, spreading branches and foliage can easily create problems. At best this requires costly maintenance, but at worst it can end up in costly litigation and even the loss of the tree. That’s the bad news, but the more constructive path is to think in terms of maximizing impact. I come from the university town of Oxford. Fifty years ago someone had the brainwave of planting ornamental cherries along all the main roads in and out of town. These never produce any fruit, but they flower for almost a month and have wonderful purple leaves. In other words, they are a wonderful addition to an already beautiful city for at least half the year.

Q: What suggestions do you have for matching the tree to the planting site?

A: That’s an incredibly difficult question. Obviously there’s no point planting a tropical tree in an area where there’s winter snow for months on end, but given that, I don’t think there are hard and fast rules. I love all trees in their natural setting, so I would tend toward

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>> DANIEL BUTLER is a former editor of *Tree News*, the in-house magazine for England’s Tree Council. In his book, “How to Plant a Tree: A Simple Celebration of Trees and Tree-Planting Ceremonies” (Tarcher/Penguin, April 2010), Butler offers a wealth of information on these stately subjects, including details about commemorative tree-planting ceremonies for every occasion. The book can be ordered at Amazon.com.

planting native species. That said, I live in Wales on the western fringe of Britain, and some of the most spectacular trees locally are Californian sequoias planted by Victorian entrepreneurs 150 years ago. They are just stunning in our Celtic valleys. And I also love utilitarianism — I just adore the idea that as well as looking beautiful in its own right, a nut or fruit tree will produce a natural bonanza of nutrients for both man and wildlife in due course. So, what’s the answer? Well, in the end, the most important thing is to remember that the trees we are talking about are for people. Therefore, it’s critical to work with the client and, better still, the local community — what do they like? Do they want just the aesthetic beauty of wonderful bark, blossom or leaves

— or are they more interested by symbolism in which case a majestic, long-lived, veteran species might be more important.

Q: When is the best time to plant?

A: Again, it varies with location, but in most places the colder months are best. Trees are generally dormant, or nearly so, and are far more tolerant of the stresses involved in transplanting.

Q: What should be taken into consideration regarding climate and soil conditions?

A: Common sense is by far the most important thing. It is pointless planting a mango in Ohio, and a birch is never going to thrive in Nevada. Most trees have evolved to thrive in a particular habitat, and you ignore millions of years of plant genetics at your peril. So, before planting, read up on your chosen species. Yes, you can alter the soil's pH to get something to grow in an otherwise alien environment, but you are setting a millstone around not only your own neck, but those of future generations. If you are in

an acid area and you plant an alkali-loving tree, then every couple of years you will have to treat the soil to keep the tree happy. And if you plant a delicate tree in a harsh climate you will need to rush out each fall to shroud the thing with frost-protection.

Q: What suggestions do you have regarding planting of B&B trees versus bare root planting versus containerized trees?

A: Impatience is a very human failing. We all suffer from it and it's one of the biggest headaches when it comes to planting trees. Clients naturally long to see results quickly, so they want a big tree now! This often means putting in a big B&B specimen and involving huge trucks, diggers and cranes. To me this just misses the big picture. Trees grow fast in their early years, but can live for centuries. Smaller, bare-rooted, specimens will usually catch up with their bigger B&B or containerized equivalents within a few years. Indeed, some years back I planted two hedges — one using foot-high bare-rooted 'whips' and

the other using 10-foot B&B stock. A decade later the 'whips' are half as high again as their expensive neighbors.

Q: What are your recommendations regarding follow-up care?

A: I wish I could put on a saintly expression and put forward a litany of after-care instructions with a straight face. The truth is I tend to 'plant and walk'. One of the wonderful things about trees is that a healthy specimen planted in the right spot should need very little aftercare. Yes, protection from deer and rabbits can be vital, and it certainly doesn't hurt to clear grass away from the base of the trunk — preferably by mulching — but, in general, the tree should be able to look after itself. If it can't, you've probably planted the wrong tree in the wrong place, in which case you are starting a potentially never-ending battle with nature. ■

John Kmita is editor of Arbor Age magazine, sister publication to SportsTurf. This interview originally appeared in Arbor Age.

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