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Garden Column
Benefit of trees
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Benefit of trees in the yard

Trees define the landscape and give us two of our most important assets, books and oxygen. Lack of trees is a prairie, many trees is a forest. Simple. And who doesn't know the first line of Joyce Kilmer's poem "Trees". "I think that I shall never see a poem lovely as a tree." However, I think a simple quote by Warren Buffet best sums up the reason to plant a tree. "Someone's sitting in the shade today because someone else planted a tree a long time ago." The druids had special ceremonies when a tree was planted or a seed was sown. To early man, trees were objects of awe and wonder.

The mystery of their growth, the movement of their leaves and branches, the way they seem to die and come back to life in the spring, and the sudden growth of the plant from the seed. One of our most venerated presidents, Abraham Lincoln, even had a maxim about trees, "Character is like a tree and reputation like a shadow. The shadow is what we think of it; the tree is the real thing." Lastly, trees are the best monuments we can erect to our own memory and as a blessing to unborn children. Every spring I feel an urge to plant a tree and this year I planted a tree from Bloomers that I was not familiar with called a Meyer spruce, another name for this tree is Chinese blue spruce.

Don't let the name turn you off. This tree is an excellent choice for our area.

This tree will grow to a height of about 40 feet, is hardy in zone 3, and has short blue-green needles. It's shape, color, excellent needle retention and disease resistance makes it an ideal ornamental tree that is considered a good replacement for the Colorado blue spruce in our area. The bluish-green foliage, smooth gray bark, and pyramidal form would make an interesting tree in your landscape.

The tree should be grown in full sunlight and is adaptable to both dry and moist growing conditions but will not tolerate standing water. It is considered to be drought tolerant so it should do well during our dry summers. It is considered to be a slower growing tree but is expected to live 80 years or more. The best part is that the tree is not fussy about soil type and is able to handle salt so it is tolerant of urban pollution and will even thrive in an inner city environment. A major positive trait for this tree in our part of the world is that deer don't particularly care for it and will "usually" leave it alone in favor of tastier goodies. As far as is known, the Meyers spruce has no significant negative characteristics. In other words, it's an ideal tree for northern Minnesota. One of my favorite "evergreens" is the Norway spruce, a name very fitting to our northern Minnesota culture. I think the reason this tree is so appealing is that at maturity it has interesting droopy branches with rich green needles. It's a tough, hardy tree that is suitable for windbreaks, growing to 60 feet with a spread of 25 to 30 feet. The tree has a strong central leader and a distinctive pyramidal form. Some references refer to it as a "refined" shape. The bark tends to be smooth and gray in color. Like Meyer spruce, deer do not find Norway spruce very tasty and normally leave it alone. In our area it has no significant negative characteristics.

An interesting tree that is winter hardy to zone 2 is the Amur maple. This beautiful tree is among the hardiest of all maples and is kind of a roly-poly representative of the tree kingdom with a height and spread of about 20 feet. Amur maple has dark green foliage throughout the season and the leaves tend to be lobed. One of its most positive features is the incredible fall colors that range from orange, scarlet, to burgundy red. It is a “clean” tree that forms colorful samaras (seeds that are popularly called whirlybirds, spinners or helicopters) in late summer. Amur maples grow best in full sun to partial shade. It is very adaptable to both dry and wet locations and should do fine under average home landscape conditions. It will grow in most soil types regardless of soil pH. It is very tolerant of urban pollution and should do well in “town”. One of the most beautiful trees for our area is the river birch, sometimes called the “red birch” because of the red hues of its peeling bark. On a personal note, my mother passed away 4 years ago. We wanted to have a living memorial to her and purchased a river birch from Bloomers. Today that tree is affectionately known as “Gertrude” and is growing beautifully. Even a quick glance at this tree recalls memories of my mother. Trees make wonderful living memorials for loved ones.

River birches will grow to 60 feet tall and spread out to 45 feet under good growing conditions. It is a rapidly growing tree that can be expected to live for 70 years or more. The bark peeling from mature trunks is stunning with a mix of white, brown, and tan colors. Already, we are starting to see this characteristic in our young tree. The peeling bark, with its’ different hues, adds interest to a monochromatic winter landscape. The foliage is a dark green throughout the summer and the “pointy” leaves turn a beautiful yellow in the fall. River birches will grow in many soil types but require an acid soil, being susceptible to iron chlorosis (yellowing of the leaves) in alkaline soils. The tree does best in full sun to partial shade and is quite adaptable, preferring to grow in average to wet conditions. It will even tolerate some standing water. It is highly tolerant of urban pollution and even thrives in inner city environments. Consider applying a thick layer of mulch around the root zone in winter to protect it in exposed locations or in colder zones. Remember, “Acts of creation are ordinarily reserved for gods and poets. To plant a tree, one need only own a shovel” – Aldo Leopold