

# Choice Trees

Landscape designer Franchesca Watson offers tips on how to choose the perfect tree for your garden



SPECIALIST TREE NURSERIES ARE THE BEST SOURCE OF SOUND ADVICE AND HEALTHY SPECIMENS

**C**hoosing and siting a tree is a big decision which deserves fair consideration. In my years of designing and advising in gardens I have come up against some very muddled thinking about trees. Usually the wishlist goes like this: the tree must have green leaves all year round but not cast too much shade; it must grow to a certain height and then stop; it must not drop anything, or have invasive roots; it must definitely have a multitude of fabulous flowers, preferably all summer; the tree must attract birds (which should not mess, nest or make too much noise) but it must not attract insects; and lastly it should have a good architectural shape and interesting bark. Unfortunately, this tree does not exist.

To help, here is a checklist in order of priorities that will assist you in deciding which tree is best suited to your needs:

**Deciduous or evergreen?** Do you want shade all year round or the sun to come through in winter? If you opt for the latter, you must be prepared to rake leaves for a month or so during autumn. Remember all trees drop their leaves — evergreens just do it in small amounts.

**Do you want a large or small tree and what shape would be ideal?** Find out the spread and heights of the various trees you are considering. Remember that the species will perform differently in different climatic zones. Regarding shape, the space you have may suit an upright shape or a spreading shape. Conical shapes such as pin oaks have low branches integral to their character.

**Exotic, indigenous or local?**

Is it important to you where the tree is from?

**What should the tree look like?**

**Texture:** The form of the leaves affects the character of the tree and its visual effect in the garden; it also determines the type of shade it will deliver — think of a fever tree as opposed to a milkwood.

**Colour:** Again, this will affect the look of the garden, and one needs to think about leaf colour as well as flower colour.

**Particular issues:** Some trees do affect pollen-allergy sufferers more than others; some trees do have invasive roots — not the right choice close to your driveway for example.

**Trainability:** Some types can easily be trained to fit the space you have for them or to fulfil some function, as European gardeners do with plane trees pollarded and woven to make living pergolas.

**Now that you have an idea of what kind of tree you want to buy, here are some factors to bear in mind when faced with a row of choices at the nursery:**

**Sales staff** Be careful of advice that you get from sales people that have to look at the label

to know which tree they are talking about. Ask for someone more knowledgeable and do a little homework first yourself.

**General health of the specimen** Does the tree look happy? Good leaves don't have too many blemishes, or pale or dark veining which indicates a nutritional deficiency.

**The formation of the tree** The tree should have balanced branches on all sides.

**Well-established in the container** Check that the tree is well-rooted and has not just recently been planted into the container. Also check that it is not root bound — for example, that it has not been standing around so long that the roots have gone round and round in the container and burst out the bottom.

**Physical damage** Check that the tree stake has not made a wound in the bark or branches have not been broken in transit.

**Big versus vigorous** If a tree is big when buying, it will not necessarily make a better or bigger tree in the end. A smaller, actively growing tree that will suit the conditions of your garden will achieve the same size in five years as one that started out bigger. ■ *Franchesca Watson* @ [www.franchescawatson.com](http://www.franchescawatson.com)