

## Plant a Tree (Arbor Day)

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# Plant a tree (Arbor Day)

by [Gemma Alexander \(G\\_Alexander\)](#) April 20, 2015



Arbor Day is about planting trees, but it's also about planning for the future. Make your Arbor Day tree-planting a success by choosing the right tree for the right place. Here's how.

Arbor Day predates our current notions of environmentalism. The holiday was [first](#) dreamed up by forward-thinking midwestern settlers in the late 1800s who missed the trees of their childhoods. Unlike most holidays, which tend to be commemorative of past events, Arbor Day looks to the future. It's a holiday based on hope; the hope that the tree we plant today will survive and grow to provide shade, fruit, and beauty many years into the future.

The theory behind Arbor Day might be a deeper than it seems on the surface, but the practice is still quite straightforward. It's a day for planting trees! So by all means, plant a tree this April 24. But which one?

To make the most of Arbor Day, we should be as forward-thinking as the pioneers who established the holiday. It can be incredibly tempting to run out to the nursery and buy whatever catches your eye, but a tree is a big commitment. You and your garden will be happier if you consider your choice carefully.

Of course the first decision is where will you put your tree? This will determine what kind of tree you can grow. When you know where your tree will grow, think about:

**1. Space** – Potential pet owners always forget that cute little puppy will grow up to be big dog, and gardeners have the same problem with trees. Never believe plant descriptions that say, “Can be kept smaller with pruning.” Heavy pruning does nothing pleasant to the shape of the tree, and who wants a tree that generates extra work on a regular basis anyway. It's better to do a little work up front in selecting a tree that will fit the space, and save hours that would be spent pruning each year for better garden activities. Use the natural mature size of the tree to decide if it will fit in the space available. Will it grow into overhead wires? Into your neighbor's yard? Will it shade a patio?

Don't forget to plan for the roots as well. People often imagine a tree as mirror images above and below ground. But the truth is that most of the roots are in the top foot or so of soil, and they can extend well past the drip line. If you are placing your tree near the house, you will probably want to plant it at least twice as far from the wall as your first impulse would lead you to do. Again, use the mature size of the tree as a guide and measure the distance – your tree might look absurdly small and isolated when you plant it that far from the building, but in a few years you'll be glad you gave it room.

**2. The Tree's Needs** – If you don't account for your tree's needs it will die, and then you will have wasted your money and all your work in planting and watering it. Even if it survives, a sun-loving tree planted in deep shade, or a drought-tolerant tree in a muddy spot will not grow into the beautiful specimen you imagine. Just as you would do with any other plant, consider how much sun your site receives; what kind of soil you have; how wet the area is, or how regularly you water. Find out if the tree you are considering is susceptible to any major diseases that are prevalent in your area. There's no point asking for trouble. Check whether the tree is rated for your hardiness zone. If it's borderline, ask yourself if you really want to run outside in near-freezing weather to cover it every time the temperature drops. And what will you do when it grows too big to cover? Removing a large, dead tree is quite expensive. No matter how beautiful those exotic species may be, it's better to stick with trees that are adapted to your climate.

**3. Your Wants** – You're going to be living with your tree for a long time, so make sure it's one that you love. This is the part where you get to dream of beautiful spring flowers, but don't forget the rest of the tree and the rest of the year. The cascades of yellow flowers on Golden Chain Tree are breathtaking for two weeks every year, but its knobby trunk is ugly all year long. Do you want fragrance, or do you have allergies? I love picking Rainier cherries right in my front yard, but I wish the birds they attract weren't sitting on branches above my car in the driveway. Many popular trees drop fruit or attract aphids that drip honeydew. This may not matter if the tree is planted in the center of a large flowerbed, but few people appreciate a sticky sidewalk or a lawn filled with rotting fruit. There is no right answer to questions about fruit, flowers, and fragrance, they are all matters of taste. But you should consider them before you drive to the nursery with your credit card.

**4. Invasives** – Once you've found a tree, check the invasive species list. Many invasives are beautiful plants, and they often come with the temptation that they are easy to grow in challenging places. But they wreak havoc in your garden and beyond. Don't think that you can keep your invasive tree under control. Invasives will escape the garden and they are driving native species of plants and animals to extinction all over the country. Under no circumstances should you plant Russian olive. Other species may be well-behaved in certain climates and dangerously aggressive in others. Familiarize yourself with your state's noxious weed list and don't ignore it when you're shopping for plants. Remember, Arbor Day is

about hope for the future. Don't be that guy.

That's a lot to think about, for sure, but this checklist will help you plant the right tree in the right place:

- size
- sunlight
- soil
- moisture
- common diseases
- hardiness
- invasiveness
- mess
- desired (or undesired) traits like fruit, flowers, fragrance

It may take a little bit of the thrill out of discovering a new tree at the nursery, but doing a little homework will ensure the tree you plant thrives in its new home and grows to give you years of pleasure in your garden. And that's the true spirit of Arbor Day.

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Gemma is a contributing writer to Dave's Garden.

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