

## **I Want A Tree That Looks Just Like That!**

### **AGRI-VIEWS**

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

I am routinely asked by homeowners to identify a tree at some location. Or they bring me in a photo of a tree on their phone, or they email or text it to me. They saw it, they loved it and they want one just like it. These questions are generally restricted to early spring when trees are blooming and early fall when the leaves are changing color. Unfortunately, selecting a tree based solely on how it looks for a few weeks out of the year is the biggest mistake you could make!

We are at the time of year when a lot of trees and shrubs are selected and planted. This is a very critical time as most trees are killed before they are ever planted. If you think I'm blaming the nursery, I'm not. I'm blaming the selection of the tree to begin with. A tree that is selected for bloom or fall leaf color, planted in the wrong location is doomed. It's an uphill battle that is seldom won.

When you are selecting a tree (or shrub) you need to look at how much space do you have, both width and height. Too few people look up when they are planting. Are there utility lines overhead, or nearby, that the tree may start to interfere with as it grows? When you are planting a tree that is four to eight feet tall, it is sometimes difficult to imagine it as a mature tree with a spread of 30 feet and a height of 50 feet. Is the soil deep, or shallow and rocky? Is it a windy location with lots of sun or partially protected from the wind with moderate shade? Other trees close by will cause your young tree to bend out of the way to get to more sunlight.

Then take a look at your turf management. In all honesty, if you pride yourself on having a highly manicured lawn that your water regularly and keep deep green all summer long, you don't have a good environment for shade trees. Very few trees grow naturally in over watered, over fertilized turfgrass settings. I'm just being brutally honest here. But if you rarely water your lawn and are okay with having a lawn that is "okay" but it may go dormant some summers, then your trees and shrubs will probably be happier. Once you figure out what your microclimate is like, where you want to plant the tree, and how much space you truly have, then we can start to narrow down the selection and find a tree that will be happy in your space.

Now it's time to try to keep the tree alive and happy. Plant the tree at the proper depth so the crown of the tree is at the soil level. I'll be honest and say that even nurseries that plant a lot of trees often don't plant them right. They plant them too deep or too shallow. Even on small trees you can see where the crown of the plant is and get that at ground level. Don't go overboard on fertilizer for the first few years. Fertilizers are salt based and too much salt can cause issues with the roots. Keep a three foot turf free zone all around the base of the tree. Place several inches of organic mulch in this turf free zone but spread it out and don't have mulch touching the base of the tree. Think of a doughnut when you place the mulch, not a mountain or a volcano!

This mulch free zone will eliminate the need to mow or trim around the trunk. Mechanical damage from mowers and line trimmers account for much of the damage I see on small trees. Then water when it doesn't rain, but don't drown the tree. Spending time pruning out bad structure in the first ten years can eliminate a lot of problems later. Having a well formed healthy tree is nothing more than understanding the basic biology of how a tree grows. And all the technology in the world, can't fix or change biology!