

Tree Selection and Replacement

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As a working arborist over the past 20 years I've had the sad misfortune to work with many customers who for various reasons hate their trees. Yes, they hate them with a passion. And all of those customers are tree lovers. What? How can that be? What's the reason for this love/hate relationship with their trees? Well, it all started a long time ago.

Right Tree Wrong Place

You see, a decision was made several years, maybe decades before, to plant their trees in unsuitable locations. Perhaps the planting area was too small or the power lines too low or the pool or sidewalk or driveway too close. In short, the wonderful trees they bought and thought would last forever are now *not* so wonderful. They're certainly not Bob Ross *happy trees*. Instead they are breaking up pavement, cracking block walls, damaging irrigation lines and, in general, creating a costly nightmare for themselves and their neighbors. Sometimes they are just too large for their planting area and require incessant pruning to keep them under control.

Every tree has an average size at maturity, a specific growth habit and other characteristics. These features may not have been considered at the time of planting along with the desired landscape purpose for the tree. Whatever that landscape purpose: for shade, appearance, privacy screen or noise abatement, when the trees outgrew their originally intended purpose, the owners had a tiger by the tail.

There is no use placing blame because there's a lot to go around. It might have been wrong advice from a friend or the nursery, poor design by the architect, or just the result of inadequate research before purchasing or planting. Maybe the tree was right but the placement was bad. Whatever the cause, the tree is wrong for its current location and now the owner is faced with what to do.

Tree Preservation or Replacement?

What exactly are the options when you have the wrong tree in the wrong place?

First, determine if the tree is "vale la pena," i.e. worth the pain. If the damage is extensive or expensive, it may be difficult to justify keeping the tree. It may need to be removed. On the other hand, if the tree's contributory value to the landscape is high, maybe allowances can be made or other solutions found. When a large tree began damaging a common wall between our home and our neighbor's, we asked permission to extend the wall a few feet into the neighbor's yard to enclose the tree. They agreed and the tree has provided shade to that corner for over 10 years, a benefit to both homes. Now the tree is damaging the enclosure! But we've chosen to live with the crack...and with our awesome tree.

On the other hand, I have seen trees that have caused so much damage or posed so high a risk to the landscape that the best and sometimes only solution is to remove them. In these cases it was helpful to remember that those trees served their original landscape purpose and simply exceeded or outgrew that

purpose. They provided value for a reason and a season and when that reason and season expired, it was the appropriate choice to remove them and to plant other trees to enjoy in those locations.

When the day comes to remove a tree I am often asked to recommend a replacement tree. Because we do a lot of residential maintenance, my short list of trees includes mainly trees suitable for patios or smaller areas. Because root encroachment is a frequent concern the list also includes trees with less aggressive surface rooting.

Three Great Small Trees for the Low Desert

First is the *Vitex agnes-castus*. Known as the **Chaste Tree** or Monk's Pepper Tree, this small stately tree has grey-green leaves and a dramatic purple bloom in late summer. It is deciduous, losing its leaves in winter, but its wonderful architecture is strong and elegant with seed clusters remaining attached through the fall and winter. The tree is drought tolerant, has a moderate growth rate and is relatively easy to prune to control size. Mature height and spread is 20-25 ft.

My next favorite small tree is *Caesalpinia cacalaco* or **Cascalote**. Cascalote is an evergreen tree with glossy green leaves and winter yellow blossoms. It has rose-like prickles and can be frost tender below 20 degrees but to me the small stature and low maintenance of the Cascalote offset these concerns. Again this is a tree that can be contained without great effort, unlike mesquites or other vigorous trees that tend to outgrow your efforts to keep them under control. Mature size is 20-25 ft.

My third favorite tree is the *Acacia aneura* or **Mulga**. The Mulga is an underused grey-leafed tree with unique purple-hued bark. It has a pyramidal-shaped crown with upright branches and growth habit. Like a worshipper with upraised hands it brings a smile to any landscape! It has a spring bloom of yellow rod-shaped flowers followed by reddish pods. Like the other two trees, the Mulga is 20-25 ft., slow-growing, drought-tolerant, takes full sun and is suitable for almost any residential or commercial application.

If you are planning a new landscape or replacing trees in an older one, these three trees are a great place to start. With a little research and help from your local nursery, arborist or extension office your trees will be able to grow without limits to their full age and size without unnecessary human intervention. And I think that would make Bob Ross happy too.

For a list of additional replacement trees, see the article titled [Small and Medium-Sized Trees](#).