

HOW TO CARE FOR YOUR GARDEN'S GREATEST ASSET

Trees

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY COLLEEN MIKO
(ALL PHOTOS TAKEN AT THE BLOEDEL RESERVE)

John Muir once remarked that nothing in man's experience holds his interest from childhood through old age like nature. And in the natural world, few things evoke the kind of awe that trees do. Perhaps it's because their size and their longevity make our own size and lifespan seem insignificant. Maybe it's due to their ability to provide not only vital oxygen like other plants, but also food, shelter and enduring beauty.

Did you know that urban trees throughout the United States are being lost at a greater rate than they are being planted? No doubt you've heard there are more groups than ever advocating planting trees, but while these efforts are certainly important, taking care of the trees we already have is just as crucial. A mature tree is so much more valuable to our gardens and to our overall ecosystem than a younger one.

Tree Care Professionals

The symbol of autumn is a falling leaf and autumn is a fitting time of the year to consider the trees we have in our gardens and what kind of care they need. And no one understands trees like an ISA Certified Arborist. The International Society of Arboriculture (ISA) certifies only



Above: Western Red Cedar (*Thuja plicata*) guards the reflection pool.

Right: Tulip tree (*Liriodendron tulipifera*)

professional arborists who have passed an extensive exam and have at least three years of work experience with trees. In order to maintain certification, an arborist must also receive continuing education. Our region's ISA also oversees a program for the specialty of Certified Tree Risk Assessor. The most complete certification offered by the ISA is that of Board Certified Master Arborist, a designation awarded to those with a superior understanding of tree science, management and practice.



In my work as a landscape designer and garden consultant, I recommend ISA certified arborists to my clients and I also personally hire them at least annually to help care for my own garden trees. For this article I interviewed ISA Board Certified Master Arborist Mike Juneau, from Juneau Trees and Landscape, Inc. in Silverdale. Juneau, who climbed his first big tree at age 5 at his parents' home in Seabeck, is a lifelong tree lover with a wealth of tree expertise.

He has a unique perspective when it comes to trees. Not only does he thoroughly understand trees, but he has a bachelor's degree in horticulture and landscape architecture from WSU. I guess you could say he sees both the trees and "the forest for the trees." His training is reflected in his holistic approach to trees as part of the forest ecosystem and garden. Not only does he know tree-care, he has an excellent sense of their landscape aesthetic.

The Importance of Tree Care

I asked Juneau what he thought were the most important aspects of tree care and his No. 1 answer was, "Protect newly planted as well as mature and native trees." And this means protecting all parts of the tree, including the trunk, large branches and especially the expansive roots. Since once a tree is damaged in some way, it's difficult or impossible to repair, protecting it from injury in the first place is imperative. What may seem to us to be minor damage to the trunk or roots may be fatal to a tree.

For proper care of new trees, Juneau says the most important step is one we don't think much of — the planting technique. A large percentage of tree problems are caused by incorrect planting and a good number of newly planted trees don't make it through their first year because of planting error. Not only should we remove twine and wrappings of all kinds, but we should be planting the root ball slightly higher than the surrounding soil. Planting too deeply causes tree failure sooner or later. Most of us know how important keeping a tree watered and mulched is, especially in our dry summers, but did you know that ►

proper training and pruning in the early years of a tree's life is important to how long it lives? In other words, the right care while your maple is young can insure that you'll be enjoying that tree when you're both mature.

We all know that stress can weaken our systems and make us susceptible to health problems. Juneau explains that it's not much different for a tree. While trees are very adaptable, as is the human body, there are limits to what stress a tree can take. Therefore, relieving stress on your trees will help their health and longevity. A tree that experiences prolonged drought stress or overwatering is susceptible to root rot or attack by insect pests. Overfertilizing or using herbicides near trees (this includes using "weed and feed" style products on lawns) can stress and weaken trees.

Trees are poorly understood, even by many professionals who run tree-service companies. There is a lot of myth and misinformation out there and it helps to consult with certified professionals who are educated with the latest tree science. As Juneau says, he wouldn't ask his mechanic for a medical opinion, or his dentist about financial investments. So when it comes to our trees, we should do our homework and get the most updated, expert advice. When in doubt about the health of a tree in my garden, I put a call into an ISA certified arborist or consult ISA's brochures and website.

Tree Risk Assessment

We've had some whoppers of winter storms the past few years and on the eve of our storm season, it's not a bad idea to think about our garden trees and which ones might be susceptible to storm damage. Juneau says the most important thing to think about when surveying trees for potential hazards is the individual history. Ask yourself if the tree has suffered damaged roots from installation of utility or septic lines. You'd be surprised how far out roots can spread away from the trunk and the ends of the branches, especially in shallow soils. Does the ground around the base of the tree get saturated with water from downspouts or driveway runoff? Even healthy trees can fall over if the ground underneath is too wet. Is a tree the lone remainder of a group of



The graceful Katsura tree



Above: The Serbian Spruce (*Picea omorika*) are stately evergreen spires. Below: Fernleaf Maples outside a Japanese garden



trees that were removed? This tree is more likely to fail without the other trees to protect it.

Trees that have poorly shaped trunks can be susceptible to storm damage. If a tree has only big limbs up high and very few branches lower down the trunk, multiple trunks or tops (called "leaders"), or is leaning over, it may be a hazard. Sometimes a good indicator is what is referred to as a "distress seed crop" where the tree puts a lot of energy into producing more seeds or cones than usual. If a tree is thinning and you can see more of the sky through it than you could before, this may indicate a failing tree. But sometimes it's hard to tell what constitutes a poorly-shaped tree, considering that different types and species of trees have different forms. If the tree you are wondering about is near a structure or is where people regularly gather, do what I do, and hire a certified arborist to come out and have a look. I always feel better after I do.

Considering Tree Species

Every tree species has its strengths and weaknesses, locations and exposures where it can excel or struggle. You may have heard the saying, "Right plant, right place." This applies to trees and proper planning makes for healthy trees. Allowing enough room for a tree to spread and mature is one consideration, as is the quality of the soil it will be planted in, the amount of sun or shade it will receive and whether its location is wet ►



The leaves of the Fernleaf Maple will turn colorful in the fall.

MIKE'S TOP 5 TREES

1. *Acer japonicum* "Aconitifolium" (Fernleaf Maple) — beautiful leaves and bold fall color; good size for the garden
2. *Betula albosinensis* var. *septentrionalis* (Chinese Red Birch) — dramatic, pink tinted exfoliating bark; medium-sized
3. *Malus* "Prairie Fire" or *Malus transitoria* "Golden Raindrops" (Ornamental Crabapple) — disease-resistant small trees with all-season interest
4. *Quercus rubra* (Red Oak) — very large and fast-growing shade tree
5. *Thuja plicata* (Western Red Cedar) — large and noble native evergreen

COLLEEN'S TOP 5 TREES

1. *Liriodendron tulipifera* (Tulip Tree) — large shade tree with unique leaves
2. *Picea omorika* (Serbian Spruce) — narrow evergreen well suited to our climate
3. *Cornus mas* (Cornelian Cherry) — small tree with yellow blooms on bare branches in late winter
4. *Acer japonicum* "Aconitifolium"
5. *Cercidiphyllum japonicum* (Katsura) — medium sized tree with incredible fall color



Above: Cornelian Cherry (*Cornus mas*) looking lush in spring
Below: Leaves of Mike Juneau's favorite Red Oak



Above: The heart-shaped leaves of the Katsura Tree
Below: The unique shape of the Tulip Tree leaf



or dry. When choosing a tree, make sure it is one that is well adapted to our mild climate. For instance, Juneau mentions that many spruces and true firs suffer from pest and disease problems here, as do many cherry varieties. Of our native trees, Hemlocks and Bigleaf Maples have the most problems because they can be susceptible to decay while Douglas-firs seem to be one of the toughest, most drought-tolerant trees. But remember that much of a tree's performance depends on the care and protection it receives.

I asked Mike Juneau for a list of his five favorite trees. Keep in mind that asking an arborist to limit his or her favorite trees to fewer than 20 is torturous. He gave me a list of seven. While I have my own favorites, I was curious to know, after 20 years of working with trees and eight years of running his own tree care business, which he would include. Of his and my five favorites, there was one

tree that made it to both lists: *Acer japonicum* "Aconitifolium" (Femleaf Maple). You'll find this tree and other good choices for your garden on the list of Great Plant Picks at www.greatplanticks.org. Look for more information on tree care in part II of this article in the upcoming winter issue.

Finding and Hiring a Certified Arborist

You can find an ISA Certified Arborist in our area by contacting the Pacific Northwest Chapter International Society of Arboriculture at www.pnwisa.org or by calling 800.335-4391.

For information on recognizing tree hazards, protecting trees from construction damage and proper planting techniques, both the PNW chapter website and the general website have great information at www.isa-arbor.org.

Most arborists charge an hourly rate for an onsite consultation and to prepare any reports you might need.

When hiring a tree care company to prune or remove trees, ask for a detailed, written estimate and verify that a Certified Arborist will be performing the work, or at least supervising the work onsite. Confirm the company carries at least \$1 million in liability insurance and that it will be performing the work using the American National Standards Institute's (ANSI) A-300 Pruning Standards. ♦

RESOURCES

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The Bloedel Reserve
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