

Native Trees & Shrubs



Trees have strong symbolism and meaning in various sacred scriptures and faith communities. They are an enduring symbol of strength and protection reminding us in our busy lives of all that is good, steadfast and enduring. The “Tree of Life” that is rooted strongly into the nourishing soil and stretches its limbs into the vast sky provides a connection between the heavens and earth. *Care for Creation* can be demonstrated with the planting of new trees, and provides that symbolic connection with nature to the congregation.

Native trees and shrubs support a very biodiverse set of native flora and fauna. The species range from the tiny micro-organisms in the soil such as mycorrhizal fungi all the way to larger birds and mammals roosting and using trees for shelter. And there is so much in between including all those that benefit from the pollen, seeds, nuts, fruit and materials that trees and shrubs produce, and that take shelter in both the small and the large spaces that these woody species provide from cracks in bark to treetop nest locations. Trees and shrubs also provide many ecological benefits to their surroundings including water catchment, reducing soil erosion, cooling the ambient temperature, absorbing carbon dioxide, producing oxygen.

Trees and shrubs can be added to your landscape for specific reasons such as: religious significance, cultural symbolism, and/or community “lead by example” opportunities. Trees can be chosen to represent significant trees in religious scriptures, signs can be added to provide details on the ecological importance and/or a cultural heritage tree can be chosen and a public planting day event can be held with the community.

Trees and shrubs can be a simple addition to a landscape or they can form part of a larger redesign. It can be as easy as just adding one new tree for more shade or using a few shrubs as an effective landscape feature. Shrubs can provide unifying opportunities if you repeat the same shrub in different corners of the property. They can also be used as a visual transition from tall building to flower gardens along with helping to anchor a building into the landscape. Shrubs are a great option if a large tree is not possible. They provide a focal point to simple landscape and can provide a transitioning setting with the varying seasons, providing changing colours and textures throughout the year.

Some different landscaping options include:

Small Ornamental Tree/Shrub: this is a great option when there is limited space. Many native shrubs and smaller trees can provide cover and food for wildlife, and are well adapted to local conditions thus requiring less maintenance than exotic, ornamental shrubs and trees. Coniferous greenery will not require leaf collection either.

Tall Tree: a tall, narrow tree can be an option for smaller landscapes. There are some interesting narrow varieties such as columnar oaks, poplars and aspens. Or, if shade is not an issue, one large tree doesn’t require much ground level space and can reach above the garden and spread out higher up.

Group of Trees/Shrubs (3 – 5 trees): Even a small grouping of trees and shrubs can provide a resting spot for migrating birds especially in urban areas. These trees can provide suitable shelter and fuel for the next leg in their journey, such as protein from insects or native berries. If it’s a mixed group of plants, this provides more opportunities and enjoyment with different blooms, berries and visiting pollinators such as beneficial insects and birds.

Line of Shrubs (Hedgerow): A line of shrubs creates a living fence when planted close together. It can offer privacy, define an outdoor “room”, add colour, texture and variety to a simple yard, and at the same time provide much needed wildlife corridors. Please refer the Hedgerow Fact Sheet for more information.

Line of Trees: If your faith community has a larger property there may be a distribution of mature trees. If they are mature trees of the same generation, it would be beneficial to intersperse with a younger



generation. If it's a row of matching trees, add some diversity with the younger plants. Even though a row of Elm or Maple can look elegant, a mixture of two or three trees (repeated in the same pattern) can provide some of that beauty of order while also offering a diversity to wildlife and protection against disease and pests through the resiliency of a mixture of plants.

Small Orchard Wood: If a larger space is available, a small orchard or grove could be created. This would not only benefit migrating birds but also local wildlife. It also provides a cooling effect. Use shade-tolerant native plants as a ground cover. A fine fescue could also be used (so that mowing under the trees would not be required) but raking leaves in the fall would be necessary for these delicate native grasses.

Commemorative trees

If desired by the faith community, planting a commemorative tree could be an offering to congregant members. To ensure beneficial and low maintenance foliage is planted, the faith community should create a landscape plan to help guide congregants in the tree's location and a suggested list of trees. These trees can be chosen both for their appropriate features but also for their symbolism that will resonate with congregants.

If possible, compile a list of 15 – 20 commemoration trees to recommend to parishioners. Recommend native trees and highlight the characteristics of the chosen trees whether it be spring-time bloom, native maple, all season conifer, wildlife favourite, etc. Explain that the recommended trees were chosen for the specific characteristics of the site and maintenance schedule.

Faith communities may also have a practice of planting commemorative trees as part of a memorial service whether this is on the faith community property or at a burial ground. For those faith communities that also provide a burial location for their congregation, there may be an opportunity to consider a new type of natural burial option with eco-burial initiatives being explored in Ontario and British Columbia.

Veteran Trees

Consider planting new trees inter spaced between trees that are between 30 and 50 or more years old. It is very hard to replace an old veteran tree with a young newly planted one, so it is wise to ensure that there are a few generations of trees in a yard. If possible, do not retire veteran trees too early, as they have features that are highly valuable to wildlife and are ecosystems unto themselves. They support plants such as mosses, lichens and fungi, provide shelter in their hollows and splits and offer unique habitats for invertebrates that in turn support other wildlife up the food chain.

Have a tree professional examine any trees that seem to be declining or seems unbalanced. Brace limbs that need extra support and understand that as the tree ages, the crown will reduce in size. If seedlings or seeds from the veteran tree can be collected and propagated, consider an appropriate place for the next generation of trees to grow.

Choosing a Tree or Shrub

The first decision for a tree or shrub is identifying the space available and selecting the best tree or shrub that will fit into the location. Both the width and height of the full grown vegetation needs to be considered. Will overhanging branches or underground roots impact other maintenance such as parking lots or will the full height impact overhead wires or solar panels? Other considerations include:

- Proximity to buildings (shading windows or roof or providing colour in winter).
- Street and landscaping lighting – choose a location that doesn't receive direct light at night.
- Distance from walk way or parking lot or neighbours (leaves dropping and road salt conditions).
- Landscaping: how will the new shade, roots affect other plants, garden beds, etc.

Also, understanding the main intent for the new landscaping features can that help with the decision: is it for shading an area, providing food/habitat for wildlife, adding beauty and colour,



converting to more drought-tolerant plants for the landscape, helping to define an area or for growing local food (small orchard, nut & berries).

Next you want to consider the environmental conditions: soil, elevation: low spot/high spot (dry/wet), light availability and hardiness zone. The hardiness zones vary in Ontario from Zone 6b in the Windsor area to Zones 4a and 4b up in Ottawa all the way to Zones 3a & 3b further north. There are many great native tree and shrub options and your local garden centre will be able to help advise you.

Planting Tips

Before planting do a final check for the mature size of the tree or shrub and position accordingly for the full size. This is especially crucial for conifers that are wider at the bottom than they are at the top. Shrubs typically need 2 metres squared or more of space so ensure that groupings of shrubs are spaced accordingly, unless the desire is to have them grow into each other as a living fence. The space may look sparse now but filler plants can be added temporarily to fill up empty space. The plants can be transplanted (or donated) once the tree or shrub fills out.

Proper planting is key to a tree or shrubs survival. Plants take in oxygen through many surfaces. This is important to remember especially when planting trees and shrubs as roots should not be buried too deep. When digging a hole for your new plant, keep the soil close by as you will use this to refill the hole. Do not make the hole any deeper than the root ball as you do not want the plant to settle further after being planted. Your tree or shrub should be on solid ground when placed in the hole. Determine where the root flare is and keep the curve of the trunk above the ground. This also ensures that the roots are close to the surface.

Do not add amendments around the tree or below the root ball. Fill in the hole with the displaced soil, adding water, when it's half filled and then watering again when all the soil has been put back. Don't compact the soil around the new plant by using your full weight and stepping around the plant. Level and pat down the soil with your hands allowing the newly aerated soil to provide an oxygenated environment for the new plant.

Watering is also key to the tree or shrub's survival in the first year. Many plants lose a high percentage of their roots when transplanted and cannot take in enough water on their own. For the first two weeks after planting, water daily (unless there is rain) during the cooler part of the day (early morning or early evening). Ensure that the soil around the plant stays moist. Even drought tolerant plants will need extra care until they become established.

Mulch is important to help retain water but "mulch volcanoes" are not helpful to trees. (This is when the mulch is piled up like a cone around the trunk.) First the mulch is too deep for water to soak through and also this "volcano" ends up settling and covering the trunk which can lead to rot and weaken the tree's immunity. Instead of a volcano, just spread the mulch at a depth of 5 cms around the tree. Keep the first 10 – 13 cms just around the trunk, free of mulch. If you can, adding mulch under the full area of the canopy will ensure that the tree or shrub is not competing with grass for moisture.

Maintenance Tips

Watering for the first year should continue weekly. This should be a heavy soaking once a week, rather than more frequent shallow waterings. The recommendation is that for each 1 cms in diameter, a tree should receive 7.5 litres of water a week. So a tree 5 cms in diameter (15.7 cms in circumference) should receive 37.5 litres of water a week. For the first two months after planting, the tree's roots are still within the original root ball so concentrate watering close to the tree without making the trunk unnecessarily wet. After the initial two months, water under the full canopy of the tree which is called the drip line. In the second year, concentrate more of the water further out to the dripline as this will encourage the roots to grow. One thing to remember, is that watering trees during droughts is even more important than watering your lawn. Allow your lawn to go dormant and use the water for trees. Remember you will not see damage to trees until the following year.

Pruning can either be a low maintenance effort or become an annual task. Simple pruning can include clearing dead branches and some light

“training” of the tree when it is still small. Some pruning to help establish a strong leader (the main branch growing straight up from trunk) can help with the tree’s establishment but is not essential. Shrubs can be left to grow as they would in a natural setting or they can be pruned annually. With shrubs, remember that any pruning will encourage new growth where the cut was made. Once you start with pruning, you will likely need to go back annually to keep the growth in control. Don’t do any pruning during drought periods when plants are under stress.

See *Outdoor Greening Primer* for other gardening tips for trees and shrubs.

Links / Further Info:

Natural Burial Association (Toronto):
www.naturalburialassoc.ca/

