

Plant the right size plant in the right size place

Before selecting a plant, be sure to find out how large it will eventually get. Find out the mature size in height and width. And don't rely on the word dwarf in the plant name. This term is relative and can be very misleading.

For example, a dwarf Burford holly can grow six feet or more in height. This may not be what the homeowner had in mind when buying a "dwarf" shrub to place beneath a low window. In some cases, the word dwarf may only mean that the plant has smaller leaves, is more compact and has a slower growth rate as compared to the standard version of the same plant.

A common landscape mistake is to not place the plants properly when planting to allow for their mature size.

Planting a tree that will eventually reach 80 feet in height under a power line that's 20 feet off the ground eventually creates problems for both the tree and the power lines. It's almost as if the lines were used as a reference to place the trees in a straight row.

Your landscape may not be large enough to accommodate a standard Southern magnolia. This is a nice native tree but it's not for the landscape with limited room. It can easily grow to 80 feet in height and 40 feet in width.

Another common example is placing plants such as shore junipers in narrow plant beds. Shore juniper is a poor choice for narrow beds. It is designed to grow outward. One shore juniper can have a mature spread of 6 to 9 feet! Why try to force it to spend its entire life in a two-foot wide bed? Because it is genetically designed to spread outward, you will eventually have to "butcher" the plant. And junipers don't respond well to severe pruning. It usually results in plant decline. And eventually the entire planting of junipers becomes an eyesore in the landscape as the plants begin to die.

Many common landscape problems happen simply because someone did not realize the plant's mature size and space requirements. It's certainly worth your time to find out how large a plant will be at maturity. Our office has this information for most plants appropriate for North Florida. A reputable nursery should be able to quickly provide this information for the plants they sell. Or you can refer to a reliable book or other publication on plants for Florida. The point is to find out before you plant so that you can plant the right size plant in the right size place.

Larry Williams, UF/IFAS Extension Agent, Okaloosa County, April 20, 2011