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Updated: April 5, 2010, 10:14 am

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Choosing Flowering Trees

By Michael Gaines



An early cherry flower. (Cedar Walk Nursery)

East Hampton - Why plant a flower or two if you can plant a tree full of them? Trees are a lifetime investment and offer social, communal, environmental and economic benefits. Choosing flowering trees can be tricky no matter how beautiful it is. Each tree has its own ideal growing area and nutrition requirements.

Recently, I was asked what my favorite flowering tree is. My immediate answer was the Tuliptree. However, my mind was busy deciding on the appropriate place and listing various requirements for the tree. Here, I use the examples of two favorites to illustrate my points of trees I admire - Tuliptree and Golden Chain Tree.

The Tuliptree

Commonly referred to as Yellow, White or Magnolia Poplar (in spite of the fact that it is not a poplar, it is in the same Magnolia family) is fast-growing and looks magnificent lining a driveway. Tuliptree is a tall, broad-leaved tree that produces yellow to green tulip-like blossoms in spring and is equally stunning in fall when the leaves go yellow and gold. It tends to be a symmetrical tree that grows 80 to 100 feet and supplies a 30 to 50-foot shade canopy.

Pruning requirements for Tuliptrees are basic. These trees flourish in full sun but require plenty of root drainage and like acidic soil. They are not fond of salt air or soil, which can stunt their growth or in extreme cases, cause death. In spite of being a hardwood tree, the wood tends to be soft, thus hurricane force winds can cause major damage. The biggest drawback is the trees attract aphids, insects that leave behind honeydew excretions, which in turn provides a place for sooty mold to grow. Neither of these conditions cause long-term damage to the tree but anything under the canopy will be covered in powdery, sticky residue. Tuliptrees are also widely considered immune to gypsy moth infestation inviting deer, squirrels, rabbits and such to feed on leaves and blossoms.

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Horse chestnut unfurling.

Golden Chain Tree

A type of Laburnum, a gorgeous ornamental. Occasionally, I find myself planning arches and walkways beneath the golden cascades of flowers. Laburnum is a small, shrub-like tree generally topping out between 15 and 20 feet. You can also train the growth, making it form certain shapes or sizes. The golden blooms begin in mid-to-late spring and continue through the early summer. Laburnum is native to central and southern Europe, a consideration if you are planting native trees.

The Laburnum requires a bit more maintenance. It requires maximum cultivation, well-drained and neutral soil, and partial sun and partial shade. Somewhat temperamental, the tree will eventually die if it gets too much or not enough water or fertilizer. Laburnum is not salt resistant and only cold tolerant to about 10 degrees Fahrenheit so additional winter care is required. Another point of consideration is that all parts of Laburnum are poisonous if ingested and just handling the tree can cause skin irritation or an allergic reaction; not a good choice if you have children and animals.

When choosing which flowering trees to plant this spring, it is essential to consider location, sun or shade, water and soil needs, pruning, pest resistance and toxicity. Also, remember that resistant does not mean immune! No matter how beautiful they are before planting, they must be maintained properly to bring out optimal growth, health and enjoyment.

Here on the East End we have hundreds, if not thousands, of species of trees - Cherries, Dogwoods, Magnolias, Horse Chestnuts and so on. Each has its own place. In East Hampton, I couldn't imagine Further Lane without the showing of Cherry Blossoms or Town Pond without Horse Chestnuts!

Michael Gaines is founder and president of CW Arborists, Ltd. (located in East Hampton). For more information go to www.cwarborists.com

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Sat April 17
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Sustainable Lawn Care Presentation With The Peconic Land Trust
Sat April 17
Learn how to grow and maintain an ecologically healthy lawn

Annual Pruning/Rose Care Session
Sat April 17
First event of the year of the Southampton Rose Society

Celebrate Earth Day With The Peconic Land Trust
Thu April 22
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Peconic Land Trust And Madoo Conservancy's Garden Lecture Series
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