Friday’s Feature
By
Theresa Friday
November 15, 2009

Magnolias are gems

Fall is the best time to plant trees along Florida’s Gulf Coast. The heat of summer has abated, the day lengths are shorter and plants will spend the winter growing their underground root systems. Planting now allows trees to grow their root systems several months prior to the heat of summer. The result will be a stronger and healthier plant.

So if you have been thinking about adding a tree or two to your landscape, now is the time to make your decision and get the tree planted.

But, which tree to plant? There are many to choose from. Because trees are typically long lived, making a good decision initially will save you time and trouble in years to come. The biggest mistake gardeners make is choosing a tree that will quickly outgrow its planting site. Be sure to learn the mature size of the tree before picking the perfect spot for its home. If you already have a spot in mind, be sure that you choose a tree that will not outgrow the spot.

If you are looking for a large tree, then consider a southern favorite, the magnolia. Magnolias come in all shapes and sizes, but perhaps the most well-known magnolia in Florida is the Southern magnolia, *Magnolia grandiflora*.

These stately trees can grow up to 90 feet tall, depending on the cultivar, and have lustrous, evergreen foliage that makes a great backdrop for other garden plants. In the spring and summer, Southern magnolias produce creamy white flowers that have a lemony smell and can be as large across as dinner plates.

Today, there are over 40 cultivars of Southern magnolia on the market. Many new cultivars flower at an earlier age and have a tighter, denser canopy or smaller growth habit than older cultivars. Another popular characteristic is a rusty-bronze appearance of the underside of the leaves, commonly called the “back”.

‘Bracken's Brown Beauty’ is considered one of the best selections for foliage and plant form. The lower leaf surface, or back, is a rich, dark brown and has a fuzzy texture. The tree reaches 30 to 50 feet tall and 30 feet wide, so it needs room to spread. It tends to be self-branching and forms a dense canopy.
‘Claudia Wannamaker’ is one of the older selections of Southern magnolia that still is widely grown. The foliage is dark green with a silvery-tan back. At maturity, this tree will be about 50 feet tall.

‘D.D. Blanchard’ reaches over 50 feet at maturity. It has leathery, lustrous, dark green leaves with rich, orange-brown or copper backs. It flowers only sparingly when young.

![Flower of D.D. Blanchard](image)

‘Little Gem’ is very widely grown because of its compact form. The leaves and flowers are in proportion to its smaller plant size. Though considered compact, it still can grow up to a height of 40 feet. While it does have the longest flowering season, typically from May to November, its form is often “shrubby”, lacking a nice central leader.

‘Teddy Bear’ got its name because the leaves are reminiscent of the ears of a stuffed teddy bear. They are rounder and fuzzy with a rusty-brown back. The tree is smaller than most, reaching a mature size of about 20 feet.

There are many other cultivars of Southern magnolia. Most of these are not widely available. However, grower and consumer preferences may result in some of these having greater availability or popularity in certain markets or with changing tastes of consumers and landscapers.

The Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS) is an Equal Opportunity Institution authorized to provide research, educational information, and other services only to individuals and institutions that function with non-discrimination with respect to race, creed, color, religion, age, disability, sex, sexual orientation, marital status, national origin, political opinions, or affiliations. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Cooperative Extension Service, University of Florida, IFAS, Florida A&M University Cooperative Extension Program, and Boards of County Commissioners Cooperating.
Theresa Friday is the Environmental Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.

For additional information on County Extension Services and other articles of interest go to http://santarosa.ifas.ufl.edu.