Friday’s Feature  
By  
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Trees and power lines

Have you been thinking about adding a tree to your landscape? If so, be sure to “look up” before you make a decision on where the tree should be planted. If there are overhead power lines on your property, selecting the right tree to plant near them is very important.

Power lines and trees just don’t mix. Utility right-of-ways are a tempting place to plant trees because they are usually open and clear. But please resist that temptation unless you have done your homework.

Small, immature trees planted today can grow into problem trees in the future. Power companies must regularly perform pruning to reduce electric outages caused by interfering trees.

Electric utilities prune trees to ensure safe, reliable service to their customers and to gain access to utility structures. The practice is referred to as line clearance. Homeowners, horticulturists, and other persons without Electrical Hazard Awareness training must leave this to a line clearance tree trimmer. Call the utility company or a utility arborist to do this hazardous work.

Planting “small” trees (those that remain small even when mature) near power lines reduces pruning needs. Selecting the right tree and planting it in the right place around power lines can eliminate potential safety hazards and improve the reliability of your electric service. In addition, your tree can achieve the proper height and form desired.

Recent Florida legislation mandates that only “small” trees can be planted in utility rights-of-way.

University of Florida researchers have developed a list of small trees that have shown to be well-suited for planting below power lines. This list is now available at http://treesandpowerlines.ifas.ufl.edu.

This website provides recommended lists for several Florida regions. The Northwest Florida region includes the following counties: Escambia, Santa Rosa, Okaloosa, Walton, Holmes, Washington, Bay, Jackson, Calhoun, Liberty, Gulf and Franklin, and USDA Hardiness Zones 8A and 8B.

Some of the recommended trees include: redbud, Chinese fringe tree, crapemyrtle, ligustrum, waxmyrtle,
loquat, sweet olive, chickasaw plum, and Savannah holly.

These recommendations are based on the research conducted by Ed Gilman, professor of environmental horticulture, and included more than 70 small trees that were thought to be compatible with urban structures such as overhead power lines, streetlights and sidewalks. The study was co-sponsored by the Florida Department of Agriculture Division of Forestry.

“There really aren’t many small trees, other than crape myrtle, that are readily available from growers,” Gilman said. “Our goal was to learn the growth habits of a range of different small trees so that more of them could be grown in a nursery setting in the future.”

The research was spurred in part by legislation enacted in 2007 (Statute 163.3209) that limits the mature height of trees that municipalities can recommend for planting beneath power lines.

Homeowners, property management companies, municipalities and utility companies can benefit from the results published on the website by taking steps to recommend and plant the right trees under power lines and thereby minimize the need for pruning and the chances of tree limbs causing power outages.

Theresa Friday is the Residential 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.

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