

REPLACING ASH TREES

When an insect or disease causes widespread destruction of a tree species, a typical reaction is to look for an “alternative” species; some tree that we can plant in place of green ash or white ash. However, to latch on to one, or even a handful of selections, as replacements for ashes, invites us to repeat the mistakes of the past. For those of us who work with the Green Industry and urban forestry, the emerald ash borer crisis is a teachable moment. A recent survey indicated that ashes comprised up to 25% of the street trees in some southeast Michigan cities. In all likelihood the emerald ash borer (EAB) will eventually kill most of these trees. As trees are lost to EAB, a large-scale re-planting effort is underway. To maintain the long-term health and sustainability of our landscapes and urban forests we need to consider and plant a diversity of species and selections. Ashes were great trees, that’s why we planted so many of them. However, no one tree, or even a handful trees, can fulfill the role of ashes in our landscapes.

Diversity, diversity, diversity...

The devastation caused by exotic pests such as Dutch elm disease, chestnut blight, and emerald ash borer has taught us the importance of species diversity in our landscape. Exotic pests can be especially destructive because our native species may not have evolved and resistance mechanisms. A couple of rules of thumbs can help to promote species diversity.

The 10% rule. This rule states a single species should make up no more than 10% of the trees in a particular area. So if an especially destructive pest breaks out, 90% of the trees will remain healthy.

The ‘Look around’ rule. This rule is helpful for homeowners and landscaper working on a smaller scale. This rule states when you select a tree; look around, if you see a lot of a particular species, plant something else.

Availability

The “death toll” from EAB is staggering and rising everyday. Replacing the trees lost will take years. Nurseries in Michigan and throughout the country are growing trees to meet the demand created by the Emerald Ash Borer. But the production of landscape and street trees is like a pipeline. Producing a 2” or 3” caliper tree takes several years.

If the species and size you want is not available at your local nursery or garden center consider:

- **A smaller size.** If you can’t find a 3” caliper tree, is a 2” tree available?
- **A different stock type:** Trees are sold as container stock, balled in burlap (B & B), and bare root. Container trees are increasingly popular because they are easy to handle and usually transplant well. If the tree you want is not available in a container, check to see if it is available as a B & B tree.
- **A different species or cultivar.** There are many wonderful trees on this list. If the tree you want is not available, consider another selection with similar form and size characteristics.

Excerpted from “Recommended Trees for Michigan Lower Peninsula” written by Dr. Bert Cregg and Dr. Robert Schutzki, Michigan State Department of Horticulture