

Aspens

In the wild, aspen trees are among our most beautiful trees, with their almost snow-white trunks, shimmering leaves and yellow fall color. Because of these qualities, many have planted them in the landscapes but have also experienced watching mature trees die rather quickly.

Unfortunately, aspens often struggle and are short lived, living anywhere from 5-15 years, outside of their native habitat. When planted around our homes, they are more susceptible to many insect/disease problems and nutrient deficiencies from stress caused by being planted away from their native habitat.

Additionally, aspens have a tendency to form many surface roots and primarily propagate themselves by sending out root suckers that form new trees connected to the mother plant. Both of these qualities make mowing around aspens difficult. Fortunately, aspens do not usually attain a size large enough to damage foundations or cement due their short lifespan.

Those who plant aspens in the yards sometimes try to prevent suckering using several different methods. One possible solution is to surround the root-ball of newly planted trees with a cement or rust-proof metal ring 3-4 feet beyond the root system and around 2 feet deep to contain the roots. Another is the use of a product called Sucker Stopper that is sprayed on newly cut suckers. It is supposed to slow or prevent sucker formation from a spot where it is sprayed. However, this control method is not perfect as all suckers will never be eliminated. Additionally, this method is good for one season only and the spray can cost \$20-\$60 per bottle depending on the concentration purchased.

Another tree called columnar Swedish aspen is similar to our native species but taller and narrower when mature. It is relatively new to the landscape and seems to send fewer root suckers. However, it still is susceptible to pests and diseases like our native aspen and can decline rather quickly.

With the limitations aspens have, they still can be used in the landscape in limited situations if managed properly. It is important to plant trees where suckering will not be problematic. A likely place is landscape beds well away from turf areas. Given their limitations, aspens can be enjoyed as long as they are healthy and later cut down when they begin to decline. Younger trees, formed by root suckers, will quickly mature and sustain the stand. These trees should be watered to a depth of 2 feet every 2-4 weeks. However, it is not recommended that trees be overly treated with chemicals where problems occur so frequently. One can easily spend more money on pesticides to treat problems than it would be to purchase a replacement tree.

Some trees to consider as replacements for aspen include chanticleer/Cleveland pear (same tree), Queen Elizabeth maple, Tatarian maple, black alder, various crabapples and Sargent cherry. None of these look exactly like aspen but have their own ornamental qualities, are usually much less susceptible to pests and diseases and are much longer lived.