

Plant Diversity Important

In a continuation of my last column, I have decided to focus on why it is important to diversify the plant species. As I have mentioned in the past, I spent several years employed in retail sales at a garden center. One thing that I found is that most of the clientele were very cautious about using plants that they were unfamiliar with. To a certain extent it is good to be cautious, but this tendency also creates potential problems. One example of this is that 70% of Logan City's urban tree canopy is composed of various varieties of Norway maple. (I should mention that a plant variety refers to a specific strain or clone of a plant that has a defined growth characteristic different than the original species. For example, dogs are all the same species, but there are great differences in their size and color depending on the breed.) This creates the potential for disaster if a particular plant disease or pest were to somehow kill these trees. This has happened in the past when American elm was a very popular shade tree. It was overused and a disease from Asia, erroneously called Dutch elm disease, was accidentally introduced to the North American continent. In a number of years the species went from being one of the most common in the United States and Canada to being nearly extinct. This has also happened to American chestnut and is currently occurring to Ash trees in the Great Lakes region where an introduced insect borer has killed millions of Ash trees in Michigan alone. Even though efforts have been made to stop its spread, they have been largely unsuccessful. Norway maple has also escaped cultivation on the East Coast and is overtaking and negatively changing the composition of forests in the region. I have also personally witnessed these growing wildly in canyons and riparian areas on the Wasatch Front where it should not be.

Another problem with using limited tree species is that it creates monotony in the landscape. I recall a former elementary school teacher inviting our class to eat as many marshmallows as we wanted. This was a special treat at first, but each successive one I ate became less and less appetizing. The teacher actually made the class eat a few more after we wanted to be finished. Nothing drastic happened because of this, but none of my classmates or I wanted to eat marshmallows again for a very long time afterwards. To a certain extent this same thing occurs in many landscapes in Utah because of the lack of diversity in plants material. I will admit that I do notice it more than the average person because of my involvement in horticulture. However it would be very beneficial to increase the number of species used in the landscape even if you do not perceive this as much as I do.

Trees such as Norway maple are a mainstay in most local nurseries. However they do carry a wider assortment of species other than this. From personal experience, they would actually be thrilled to have customers request less common plants. Asking for underutilized species also encourages them, as businesses, to carry a greater assortment of plants, because they perceive an increased demand.

Although it is the middle of winter when the weather gets warmer there are several places along the Wasatch Front to not only see how beautiful many of these less common species are, but also to get ideas on how to use them in the landscape. The Utah State University Greenville Farm located at 1700 North and 800 East in Logan, contains well planned demonstration gardens. The Utah Botanical Center in Kaysville, Jordan Valley Water Conservancy District and Red Butte Gardens located in the Salt

Lake City area are also valuable resources. Over the next few weeks I plan to focus on specific underutilized species starting with trees, and I hope that it will be beneficial.