

Less Common Shade Trees Taun Beddes

Shade trees are an important part of the home landscape. They offer shade, reduce water use and help naturally cool buildings. Since European settlement we have been planting trees, but many of the tree species we grow have changed over the years. An example includes that there are certain trees used by the first European settlers in the 1840s that we still grow, but others we do not. Trends change, the size of modern yards are smaller, introduced diseases and insect pests have eliminated certain species from use. Here are a few tree species that were once common that we no longer see in the modern landscape or are fading from use.

American Elm once dominated the eastern forests and was the most commonly planted landscape tree in the United States. It lined the streets of cities all over the country. In the early 1900s a disease called Dutch Elm Disease was accidentally introduced from Asia that began killing the species. Even though it is from Asia, it is called Dutch Elm disease due to a milder form of the disease being found in Holland. Over several decades the disease spread, and American elm almost became extinct. The reason the disease spread so rapidly was that American elm was used too much in the landscape creating what is called a monoculture. There are only a few American elms left in Utah. Some are located on university campuses and others in city parks in Salt Lake City and Logan. Efforts are being made to bring the species back with limited success. Resistant American elms can be purchased online as well as some garden centers for landscape use. Additionally, many other useful elm species and hybrid elm trees are available.

Black locust is another tree native to Eastern forests. It is related to the commonly planted honey locust but grows more quickly, and has pretty spring flowers and hard, rot-resistant wood. Its lumber was used for fence posts, wooden shipbuilding, general construction and anywhere else wood rotting was an issue. It was also planted across the United States for use as a landscape species. In fact, during the depression, it was one of the few trees that would grow and thrive in the Dust Bowl. People were actually paid to collect the seeds so that the seeds could be planted to help hold and restore the soil. The wild tree has thorns, but landscape forms such as 'Purple Robe' and 'Idaho' are thornless and mostly seedless. Trees are still available for purchase, but, once planted, they usually decline within 20 years due to a native pest called black locust borer. You occasionally see big trees in rural, isolated homesteads. The tree is still commonly used in Europe where black locust borer does not exist.

American ash tree species are another group on the decline. Common varieties include 'Summit', 'Patmore', and 'Autumn Purple'. They are also commonly referred to as male seedless ash. They tolerate Utah soils well, have a moderately fast growth rate, and are relatively pest and disease-resistant. They are declining nationally due to an introduced insect pest from Asia, emerald ash borer. The pest was first found in the Atlantic states and has spread from there. So far it is not found in Utah. It is in Colorado, though, and so it is a matter of time before it invades. Ash trees are virtually no longer available in commerce in Utah.

There are other tree species that are less commonly planted now than they used to be. Some include catalpa, fruitless mulberry, horse chestnut, cottonless cottonwood, and silver maple. This is mainly due to today's smaller yards. These trees are still found in older neighborhoods, though. With this being said, there are many great trees that have been introduced more recently that work quite well in our landscapes.