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## One Best Pick's Tips on How to Choose a Tree Type and Where to Plant It



By Grant Hiatt | Technical Writer

*This article was crafted with the help of Mark Livingston from [Arboguard Tree Specialists](#)*

If you'd like to leave a lasting mark on your property, few home improvements are as enduring as planting a tree. In many US neighborhoods, the local trees are older than the houses they provide with shade, erosion control, and simple beauty. The tree you plant can offer the same benefits over its decades- or centuries-long life, provided you select the right species and planting site.

Mark Livingston is a certified arborist with Arboguard Tree Specialists in Atlanta, and he has the training and experience to account for all the factors involved in choosing and planting a tree. According to Mark, the kind of tree you choose should be appropriate for the planting site and vice versa—a mutual compatibility that homeowners must foster in order to raise a healthy, long-lived tree.

### Selecting a Species

“If you plant something that can take care of itself,” begins Mark, “that’s going to be best for the tree itself as well as for the people who live under it.” Mark prefers native tree species because they are specially adapted to the area in which they’ll be planted. “Native trees are always going to be less problematic. They’re more suited to local conditions, whereas exotic trees need more yearly care just to

maintain them.” While exotic trees may not immediately wither and die, Mark explains that they will be subjected to environmental stressors they aren't prepared for, leaving them more vulnerable to local pathogens, fungi, and other problems that could threaten their health.

As an arborist in Atlanta, Mark refers to the Canadian hemlock as a good example of a species that wouldn't thrive in his service area without special care. “Canadian hemlocks like full sun with a 60-degree temperature, which are conditions you'd find in the mountains or a northern climate. Here in Atlanta, you could never give the tree full sun without scorching it to pieces.”

## Picking a Good Specimen

The expertise of a professional is helpful for selecting the best specimen from a nursery. “Get some feedback from a tree care pro, like a certified arborist,” advises Mark, “somebody other than the nursery you're buying the tree from, because they think that their entire stock is wonderful, of course.”

Mark specifically looks for young trees with good form—no bends or twists in the trunk and no bifurcated trunks, which are structurally weaker. Mark also examines a tree for signs of insect damage and to confirm that the tree was dug out properly. “Sometimes,” Mark says, “nurseries want to sell a lighter tree that's easier for people to carry, so they dig the root balls smaller than they should, which greatly reduces their viability.”

## Choosing a Planting Site

**Sufficient Space.** The most obvious characteristic of a suitable planting site is space—a tree needs at least ten feet of clearance from overhead power lines, underground utilities, and paved structures like sidewalks and streets. To allot enough space for their tree, Mark reminds homeowners to visualize the amount of room the full-grown tree, not the sapling, will require.

**Adequate Drainage.** Homeowners may overlook the importance of drainage or have a hard time evaluating the drainage conditions of a potential planting site. Mark says that one easy way to test drainage is by digging a preliminary hole at the desired planting site and pouring a pitcher of water into it. “Go back in 20 minutes. If there's still water in the hole, it's not a suitable location for a tree,” explains Mark. “After sitting in a poorly drained site like that for most of its life, the roots will be mushy. Once a big wind comes along, it'll blow over.”

**Suitable Soil.** “Think of how tender a little root is,” says Mark. “It's going to be hard for it to break through a solid wall of clay.” In many cases, he adds, a tree can cope with compacted, claylike, or poorly oxygenated soil by spreading out surface roots, the kind that often crosshatch the area around a maple tree. “Maples do well in Georgia,” he states, “but they also have a higher oxygen need. If you see surface roots around your maple, it's because your soil is compacted, and they're coming up to breathe.” However, that doesn't mean that your yard's soil is too compacted to plant more trees. “You'll know if your soil is too heavily compacted when you begin to dig the hole to put your tree in,” says Mark. “If you can hardly dig the hole, then it probably wouldn't be a great place for a tree.”

**Proper Sunlight.** Mark notes that trees often have very specific sunlight needs, just like smaller, more delicate plants. “Understory trees like dogwoods and redbuds need filtered sun for most of the day; if they do get full sun, it should be three or four hours of cooler, morning sunlight. On the other hand, crape myrtles and cherry trees like more sunlight. It all depends on the species.”

## Finding the Happiest Home for Your Tree

Clearly, it's important to select both the right tree and the right planting site. "In some cases, if a planting site is not ideal," says Mark, "we can manually modify it. We can greatly reduce soil compaction with a compressed air tool, or we can install a drainage system to channel water away. But these solutions only rectify things in the short term; ultimately, the site will not be the happiest home for that tree."

A better way to ensure a healthy, long-lived tree is to cultivate the harmony that naturally exists between a regional climate, a good planting site, and a native sapling. "The best thing you can do to help a tree live in an urban environment is to select a tree and a site that will naturally do well together."

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*This spotlight article was crafted by [Arboguard Tree Specialists](#), a Tree Services Best Pick in Atlanta. While we strive to provide relevant information to all homeowners, some of the material we publish may not pertain to every area. Please contact your local Best Pick companies for any further area-specific advice.*

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