

Now is a good time for planting small evergreens

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By Jim Kirschke

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Now, in early winter, is a good time to plant trees.

In our usually mild climate, the root system will get a jump start on the hot summer weather. Among the trees that will do better if they're planted now are evergreen trees.

If you want to plant an evergreen tree but are concerned you do not have enough space, consider one of the many small evergreen trees that in the 10- to 20-foot-tall range. Trees this size can serve several purposes.

They can be an accent planting, standing alone. They can be planted in a small grouping, serving as a privacy or visual screen. They also can be used to shade a window from the low winter sun after the deciduous trees have shed their leaves.

There are a number of trees in this category, but here are three of my favorites. They are reasonably easy to grow, are readily available from local nurseries, and are frequently recommended by landscape professionals. Also important, they are all relatively low-maintenance trees. Two are native to North Florida.

Yaupon holly (*Ilex vomitoria*) is a small Southeastern native that is considered a multi-trunked tree or a large shrub. It has small, shiny green leaves without the spines usually associated with hollies. In autumn and early winter, the female plants bear large clusters of small bright red berries that are popular as Christmas decorations and attractive to birds. Yaupon is sometimes referred to as "Christmas-berry." The leaves contain caffeine, and American Indians used them to prepare a medicinal tea to induce vomiting. That is the basis for its botanical name "vomitoria."

Yaupon is a versatile plant, lending itself to pruning, so it also can be grown as an ornamental shrub or trimmed into a hedge. It will grow in a wide range of soils and in full or partial sun. There is even a weeping version called Pendula.

Southern wax myrtle (*Myrica cerifera*) is another of my favorites. It is a large, fast-growing native shrub that can be pruned to grow as a tree. The slender, light green leaves are smooth and leathery and give off a wonderful bayberry scent when crushed. The female plants bear clusters of small, gray-green berries in fall and winter. Several types of birds like them.

Usually multi-trunked, wax myrtle has a graceful appearance as it sways in the wind. Widely grown throughout the state, it is popular for its rapid growth and tolerance to pruning. It can be used as a single tree, in a group planting, as a screen or pruned into a tall hedge.

Colonists used the wax myrtle fruits' waxy covering to make fragrant candles. It tolerates infertile soil but responds well to fertilizer and regular watering. It will grow in full sun or partial shade.

Loquat (*Eriobotrya japonica*), a native of China, has become a popular tree throughout Florida. One author goes so far as to call it one of the state's best. It is attractive at all times but especially when covered with edible, yellow fruit from mid-winter to early spring. The flowers are not showy, but they do have a pleasant, sweet but spicy fragrance.

The most attractive features of the loquat are its large, dark green, leathery leaves and its dense crown, giving it a bold tropical appearance. Most often planted as a free-standing accent, it also can be used as part of an informal shrubby border and as a shade tree for patio or terrace. It is even good as an espalier, trained to grow flat against a wall or trellis. I have two loquats in my yard to screen a storage shed from view.

Its attributes of small size, hardiness, beautiful foliage, appealing fragrance and delicious fruit explain its

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popularity. Give it full or part sun. It is tolerant of a wide range of soils but does not like poor drainage. Once established it will tolerate hot, dry weather well.

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