

Planting Smaller Trees May Yield Better Success



Photo by Joseph Lyons Walthall: Vanessa Walthall and two live oaks on Hillcrest Avenue in front of Cobb School. These trees were planted by her fellow 6th graders, thirteen years ago.

Donna Legare is co-owner of Native Nurseries and is a member of the University of Florida IFAS Leon County Extension Advisory Committee, <http://leon.ifas.ufl.edu>

For September 8, 2011
Tallahassee Democrat

It seems that we often think that bigger is better, but in the case of trees, I believe you can achieve greater success by planting smaller trees.

In January of 1998, Native Nurseries collaborated with volunteers from the Department of Environmental Protection to sponsor an Arbor Day project at Cobb Middle School. Every 6th grader attended an assembly about the importance of trees and the history of Arbor Day and then each 6th grade science class planted a native tree on campus. The students were responsible for watering their trees weekly from January until school ended in May.

I have watched these trees mature over the last thirteen years. The two live oaks planted in front of the school are already on their way to forming a canopy over Hillcrest Road. I am surprised at how fast they have grown. They were small trees, in seven-gallon containers, when planted. We chose to plant trees in three- and seven-gallon pots rather than larger trees in fifteen-gallon pots so the children would not have to dig huge holes and because we knew that after May the trees would have to rely strictly on rainfall.

I recently visited the campus to check on the trees and noticed that some very large trees, possibly from 25-gallon containers, have been added to the grounds this year. Most appear to be struggling, though they are being irrigated through large water bags attached

to irrigation rings. I wonder if they would have had better success had they planted smaller trees. Only time will tell.

I have noticed that bare root seedlings of native trees, when planted in winter, are particularly robust. Their roots have never been in containers. Younger trees in three-gallon containers and seven-gallon containers haven't normally had a lot of time to become root-bound and, when planted correctly, grow very quickly.

What do scientists have to say about this? Researchers at the University of Florida advise that if irrigation cannot be provided for the recommended period after planting, smaller nursery stock should be planted to ensure survival. UF also reports that because small trees establish more quickly, they are better able to compete with weeds and they become wind-firm sooner than larger nursery stock, which is important in storms.

There are other factors to consider for successful tree planting. First, choose tree species that are well adapted to the light and soil conditions at the site. I cringe when I observe tulip poplars planted in the right-of-way along Capital Circle Southeast in deep sand. If they are ever weaned from irrigation, they will die.

The ideal time to plant trees, especially when planting in non-irrigated situations like parks and school grounds, is late fall or winter while trees are dormant. That is why Florida's Arbor Day is officially in January each year.

I feel fortunate to live in a city and county that values its trees and urban forest. It wouldn't hurt to review our landscape ordinances now and then to allow landscapers to plant smaller trees, especially if planted in clusters, which is the way nature intended trees to grow.

###