



Alamosa Trees *by Marilyn Loser*

Most Likely to Succeed: What to Look for When Buying a Tree

2011 May 11
By Marilyn Loser

“Always start with the best plant available. It is the cheapest part of the whole formula,” said State Forester Vince Urbina at a recent Alamosa Tree workshop. He suggests looking for several features when shopping for a new tree.

1. For shade trees, pick a tree with a dominant central leader. Usually, this saves pruning hassles later. When I purchased a Lanceleaf Cottonwood about 9 years ago, I didn’t consider this. About three feet from the ground the tree divided into codominant stems with included bark. What this jargon means is that the 2 stems were growing next to each other, giving a V appearance to the junction. As the tree stems grow in diameter, the bark between the two separate stems is squeezed, weakening the junction. Sometimes one stem will break off. Generally, neither stem is as healthy as it could be if it were the lone stem. Holding to the axiom of never pruning more than 25% of a tree’s canopy in one year (see the last Alamosa Trees column), we cut off the top part of the less straight and shorter stem last year. This year we trimmed the rest of the branch and the tree seems to be doing well. In retrospect I wish I had selected a different tree!

A junction between stems with a healthy attachment has a more U-shaped appearance. Sometimes, I have trouble deciding whether I’m dealing with a V or U connection. If in doubt, consult an expert before making any drastic pruning decisions.

2. Look for well-spaced branches. Most of the nursery trees I’ve seen have this feature. However, when I was looking for a Canada Chokecherry (*prunus virginiana*), I noticed that several trees had branches growing erratically. Some were growing downward. Others branches crossed over one another and were already rubbing off branch bark.

3. Look for root vigor. If the tree is in a container, check to see if the roots have reached the container wall but are not circling around the inside of the pot. Sometimes, this can be hard to determine. I’ve learned to ask the nursery people to slide the tree out of the container so I can check. If you purchase a tree with encircling roots, you need to stop the circling pattern. You might cut the circling roots or pull them out from the trunk so they’ll grow into the surrounding soil.

Recently, when I was working with the Alamosa Department of Parks Crew, we pulled out several dead root balls that clearly showed the encircling pattern. The roots never grew out into the surrounding soil. Sadly, I planted such a tree once and it died within a few years. The root mass was very dense so the tree didn’t receive enough water or nutrients in that tight mess of roots. It choked itself to death.

4. Look for above-ground vigor. If you’re planting the tree before buds break, look for healthy, un-shriveled buds and flexible branches. As sap rises in a tree breaking dormancy, the young branches become supple, and lose winter rigidity. Stand back from the tree and look at its overall structure. Is it reasonably symmetric? Or are most of the branches on one side giving the tree a lopsided

look? Also looked for pruned branches. Seeing marks where lower, temporary branches were removed is typical. However, look for upper branches that were trimmed due to wounding or dieback. This may indicate a weak tree.

5. Does the tree have any apparent insect or disease problems? This can be tricky as it may be hard to tell. Certainly, if you see bugs all over the tree or wilted, blackened leaves, be suspicious. I find it comforting to know that, by state law, nurseries can't sell diseased trees.

Siberian Elm tree note: I have wondered why these elms haven't been placed on the noxious tree list with the Russian Olive. State Forester Adam Moore gave a reasonable answer: Siberian Elm seeds aren't picked up by birds and deposited in riparian areas as are the Russian Olive seeds. Russian Olives are now replacing native trees in many of Colorado's riparian areas.

"I have a partial solution to the overabundance of Siberian Elms in Alamosa. Did you know the seeds are edible? Some say they taste a bit like oatmeal. Even though I don't like oatmeal, I'm willing to do my share to help control these trees. If each of us ate two bushels of seeds yearly, I'll bet we wouldn't have gutters overflowing with seeds or have to yank out nearly as many annoying seedlings!" Marilyn Loser