Choosing the Right Tree for Your Landscape
Rodney L. Davis, Extension Educator

Here are some characteristics that you should consider in making a wise choice for your new tree.

Root Characteristics-The roots of some species can heave sidewalks and invade turf and garden areas. This is a major consideration for trees planted near driveways, sidewalks and right-of-ways.

Life Expectancy-How long a tree lives depends on where it is planted and the care it receives. Still, some species can be expected to live longer than others. Generally, the faster growing species do not live as long or stay as healthy as ones that grow at more moderate rates.

Maintenance-Cleaning up twigs, branches, fruit and leaves all adds to the maintenance requirements of your trees. Pruning dead and diseased branches is needed to keep your trees healthy.
Growth Rate-How fast a tree grows is greatly influenced by its site, water and fertilizer. All of these things considered, there is still a great variation in the average growth rate between species. Faster growing species generally require more water, pruning and are more disease prone and short lived.

Disease Resistance-To a large extent disease resistance is dependent on the overall health and vigor of the individual tree. The faster growing species lack the ability to fight diseases compared to slower growing species.

Insect Resistance-The extent to which a tree will become damaged or killed from insect attack largely depends upon its overall health and vigor. Some species tolerate this damage better than others. Drought, heat or other stresses can attract damaging insects.

Salt/High pH Tolerance-This is of critical importance in tree species selection. If you are unsure as to the salt and/or alkali condition of your soil, check with your local Cooperative Extension Educator, NRCS representative or other knowledgeable individuals. While leaching can sometimes alter salt concentrations in the soil, it is almost impossible to effectively change the pH (alkali) level on the scale necessary for most moderate to large trees.

Drought Tolerance-Tree species vary greatly in the quantity of water they use daily as well as their ability to withstand extended periods of drought. Improper watering can greatly influence tree health and survivability.

Size at Maturity-The mature size of any individual tree will be determined by its planting site, care and the genetic potential of the species. Always consider size at maturity and the planting site in making your selections. Severe pruning to limit size can greatly reduce health, beauty and life expectancy.
Soil amendments—Remember that most lower elevation soils (under 6,000 ft.) are alkaline, salty and lack organic matter. Tree roots usually extend far beyond the drip line of the tree. It is not practical or even advisable to amend Nevada soils to meet the needs of the tree. Heavily amended soils can actually restrict root development. Rather, select trees that are adapted to our unique soils, humidity levels, temperature ranges and light exposures.

Job Description—Every plant in your landscape ought to have a job description, including trees. The first step in selecting just the right tree for your yard is to decide exactly what it is you want the tree to do. Shade, wind protection, wildlife cover? Every tree species has its own strengths and weaknesses. You wouldn’t ask a banker to do an electrician’s job. Don’t expect a cottonwood to perform like a pinion pine.

Stationary—Remember that trees are stationary. They are totally dependent upon you and the planting site to meet their needs. The more of these needs that are met by the site, the less work for you and the healthier and longer lived will be your tree.

Site Inventory—Evaluate your site for exposure to the sun, wind, and traffic. Know your soil. Is it salty; alkaline or acid; sandy or heavy clay; or somewhere in between? Does it drain?

Resources—Once you know clearly the job you wish your new tree to do and the abilities of both you and your planting site to meet the needs of your tree, you are ready to choose! Use other University of Nevada, Reno Fact sheets, the advice of friends, nursery/tree professionals, Master Gardeners or other information to assist you in selecting just the right tree for your yard.

Useful UNR Fact Sheets

• #88-73 - Hardy, Drought Tolerant and Moderately Salt Tolerant Trees for Northern Nevada
• #89-05 - Hardy, Drought Tolerant and Moderately Salt Tolerant Shrubs and Vines for Northern Nevada
• #93-83 - Planting Bare Root Trees and Shrubs in Nevada
• #94-45 - A Guide for Hand Planting: 10 Steps to Successful Tree Planting

Fact Sheet References

• Cox, Klett, Trees & Shrubs, Evergreen Trees, CSU Gardening Series #7.403, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, Co.
• Feucht, Klett, Wilson, Trees & Shrubs, Large Deciduous Trees, CSU Gardening Series #7.419, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, Co.
• Feucht, Klett, Wilson, Trees & Shrubs, Small Deciduous Trees, CSU Gardening Series #7.418, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, Co.
• Johnson, Baliette, Hardy, Drought Tolerant and Moderately Salt Tolerant Trees for Northern Nevada, Nevada Cooperative Extension Fact Sheet #88-73
• Johnson, Baker, Johnson, Urban and Community Forestry, A Guide for the Interior Western United States, United State Dept. of Agriculture, Forest Service, Intermountain Region,