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The Best Time to Plant a Tree...

by Susan Franciscovich, UC Master Gardener

The best time to plant a tree "was twenty years ago" and "the second best time is now." Regardless of their unknown origin, these words do seem wise and timely. Fall is a great time for planting trees, and home gardeners might want to consider some smart tree planting, choices which not only bode success and ease in gardening but also fall nicely in line with the growing popularity of gardening "Central Valley Style". This gardening style describes the noticeable trend that gardeners in the Central Valley are becoming more conscientious in gardening practices and that gardens are becoming more synchronized with our climate and more sustainable with our environment. This article features three excellent examples of trees which fall into this appealing gardening category: the Desert Willow, the Chaste and the Chinese Fringe trees.

The Desert Willow was new to me until five years ago when a family of friendly Texans moved in across the street and immediately planted this Texas tree favorite in their front yard. I have since watched it with great interest and much affection. The Desert Willow (*Chilopsis linearis*) is a small, delicate, deciduous tree, native to the desert regions of the Southwest and Mexico. Because of its desert origins, the water requirement is low to moderate, and it loves full sun. This tree has an open growth wispy appearance and is a fast grower. It is called a willow because of its long, narrow 2 to 5 inch long willow-like leaves. While the leaves drop early, heavy seed pods persist through the winter. From spring through fall, the Desert Willow produces lovely purple, pink, lavender, rose or white fragrant trumpet-shaped blossoms with crimped lobes, a hummingbird's delight. The tree is noted for its twisting trunk and rather shaggy bark. Desert Willows need to be thinned occasionally to maintain a rounded, spreading picturesque shape.



Desert Willow Tree

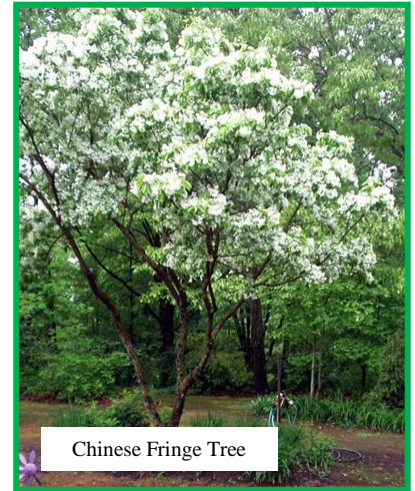


Chaste Tree

Another appealing Central Valley sustainable landscape tree, thriving in well-drained soil and requiring only moderate water, is the Chaste Tree (*Vitex agnus-castus*). A savvy gardener cousin introduced me to his newly-planted Chaste tree about ten years ago; it's now a lovely 15 foot tall shade-producer. A native of the Mediterranean region and Central Asia, its blooms are arranged in spikes of pink, white or lavender flowers. This small, deciduous tree absolutely thrives in the full sun and heat of our valley summers. Butterflies, hummingbirds and honey bees are attracted to the late summer flower spikes and the faintly aromatic palmate leaves that are gray-green in color. An annual pruning for shape keeps this tree in a good-looking rounded

spreading form, perfect as an attractive small shade tree. Chaste trees grow fast to approximately 15-25' in both height and diameter and typically have multiple trunks. An added bonus is that they are free of pest problems and resist oak root fungus

A final recommendation, requiring only moderate water is a Chinese native called the Chinese Fringe tree, (*Chionantus retusus*). A discerning gardener friend of mine, with a keen eye for landscape design, chose this tree as the true crowning glory of her backyard patio. It's a lovely tree, especially when it's in bloom. This deciduous tree is a slow grower and reaches a height of about 20 feet and a diameter of 15-20 feet. There are both male and female trees and both flower in late spring, but only the females bear fruit. Birds love the small, dark olive-like fruit. The flowers are fringelike white petals which appear in a profusion of lacy clusters of flowers. These flowers are spectacular in the spring, but last only about three weeks. The gray-brown bark provides attractive winter interest. This tree likes full sun and requires good drainage. It's easy to care for as it requires minimal pruning and resists most diseases and pests.



Chinese Fringe Tree

The garden is a good place to "walk a bit on the wild side" and try something new, especially when there is a good chance for success. Perhaps one of these "smart" landscape trees will work well for you. And, remember when it comes to planting a tree....."the second best time is now".

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