Archive for January, 2009

Visualizing Size
Monday, January 5th, 2009

When trying to get the right tree planted in the right place, many folks have trouble visualizing how big the tree will get in the place where they want to put it. If one is not used to estimating the size of objects that don't exist (especially something that grows up in the air), it can be difficult to see in the mind's eye just how much space that object will occupy.

Most tree planting guides (if they're any good) will provide information on what size the tree will get to be at maturity (when it quits growing much in height). Stem diameter may also be cited, as will the spread of the crown that can be expected under average growing conditions. The space occupied by the crown spread can be easily estimated because one can measure the average distance in feet on the ground. Viualizing height is still a problem, however, because some folks don't have a good way to measure space up into the sky.

One of the best ways to measure height is to compare it to known objects such as a building, utility pole, flag pole, etc. If you happen to live in, or near, a rural area, a good idea can be gained by looking at a grain silo or barn. A silo, in particular, can be a fairly good gauge for large trees since it would also give one an idea of the spread that can be expected. Many homes can be used as a height gauge, if you know the height from the ground to the point of the roof at a given point (usually the highest end of the house). The height of utility poles (above ground level) can usually be obtained from the company since they are required to maintain certain clearances for the lines, thus making it critical that they have the right number of feet of the pole above ground. Flag poles make for good comparisons because most owners know how deep they sunk the base; which can be subtracted from the total length of the pole to obtain the length remaining above ground.

Of course, the best way to get an idea of how well a certain species will "fit" in your landscape planting design is to consult with an urban forester, landscaper, or arborist. He/she can give you the best idea of what to plant within the space available. Getting the right tree in the right place, to begin with, prevents problems down the road that would be much more expensive to deal with; thus making an upfront consulting fee seem inexpensive in comparison.

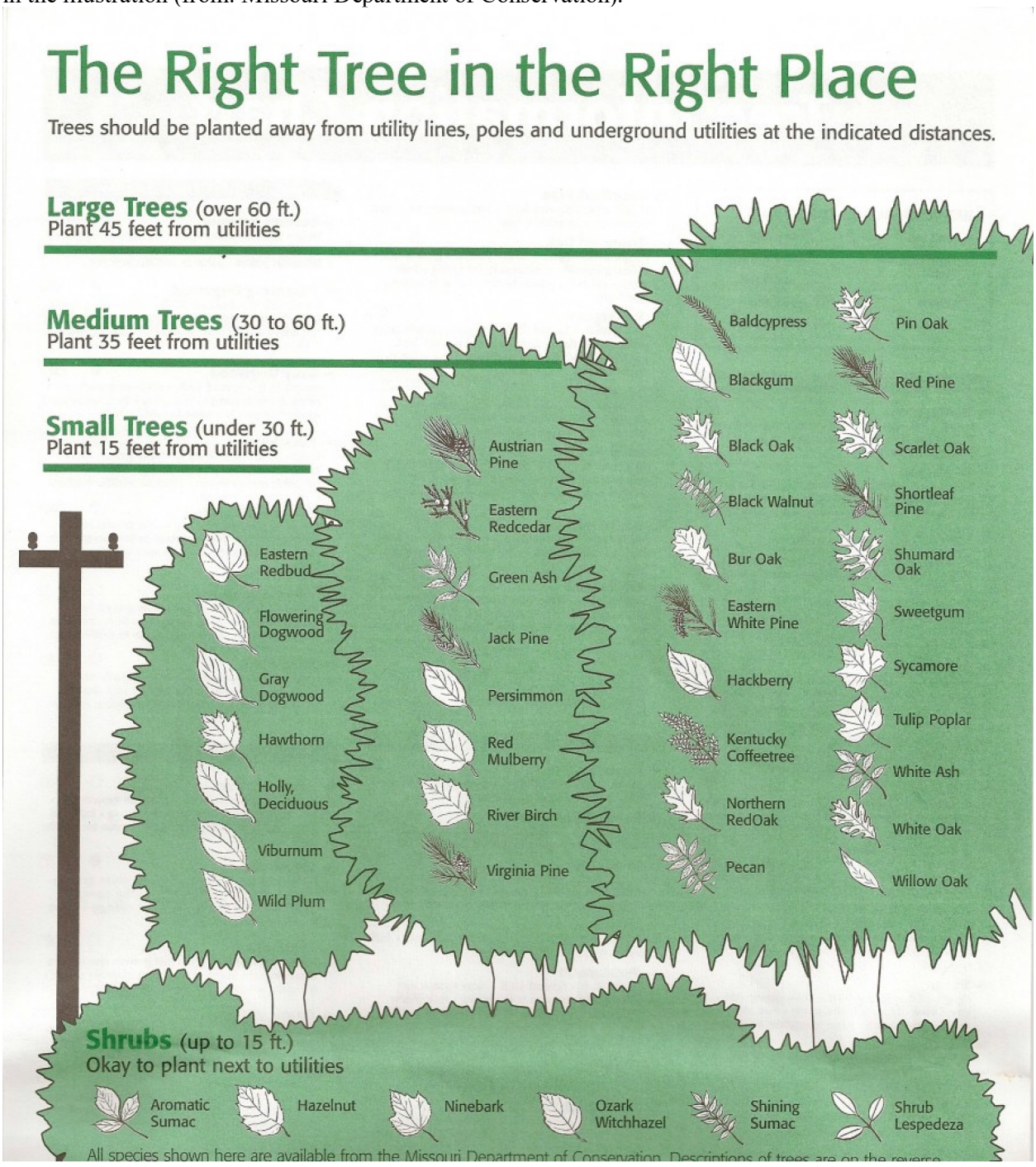
There may be better ways to visualize size that work for you. If so, use them. Give yourself time to consider this critical aspect of right tree in the right place. Also, don't get "married" to a certain planting plan that is really not feasible. By that, I mean one should avoid planting something in a place that you know to be wrong right from the outset. Even if you think you'll be gone before any problems develop (most of you won't), it is still the wrong thing to do, and is extremely unfair to a future owner of your property; ***and to the tree!***

Good luck, and let's plant a tree this coming spring; in the right place, of course.

Avoiding Utility Lines
Monday, January 12th, 2009

Getting the right tree in the right place, in relation to utility lines (above and below ground), can be one of the most critical things a homeowner can do if they expect to avoid many future conflicts between the

tree(s) and the utility line. I talked about envisioning size of a growing tree in a previous entry. In an effort to build on this theme, and to provide some practical guidance, I offer the drawing below, which shows approximate spacings from utility features for species that are expected to reach certain sizes. Most of these species are suitable for planting in Missouri, and should do quite well, if planted as recommended in the illustration (from: Missouri Department of Conservation).



Safety Around Utility Lines
Sunday, January 18th, 2009

Pruning a tree in your own yard seems like an innocent act; not an occasion to risk sudden death, or serious injury, from electrical shock. However, such things can happen to the unwary homeowner if he/she doesn't pay attention to safety when working around utility lines; both above and below ground. I previously talked about the best way to prevent tree and utility line conflicts; which is to plan and execute a planting plan that minimizes the chances of conflicts occuring in the first place. However, a homeowner occasionally encounters the need to deal with trees, limbs, storm debris, etc. that become entangled (or might come to interfere) with electrical service lines on/near their property. Doing the work yourself, in such a situation, is not recommended, because a ladder, a tree pruner, or even a tree limb can create a direct pathway for electricity from an overhead line to you. The best solution: **Hire a professional to deal with the problem, or contact your electric utility for specific advice and/or assistance.** Many utility companies will offer to take care of the problem at little or no cost, if they think it will seriously endanger their transmission line. Don't be afraid to ask.

To work safely around overhead utility lines, follow these safety rules:

1. Never trim trees near or touching wires.

2. Don't touch broken limbs laying on wires.

3. Stay away from downed wires, even if they look to be "dead."

4. Be careful while moving/placing ladders and antennas. Keep all equipment at least 10 feet away from overhead lines at all times.

5. Don't climb trees (especially children) near overhead wires. The wind, or a child's own weight, can bend a limb onto a line. Do not allow tree houses to be built close to an electric line !

Lastly, **NEVER DIG NEAR UNDERGROUND LINES !**

If there are no overhead lines on your property, your service is underground. Before you dig for any reason — to plant a tree, to build a pool, deck, or fence — call the One Call Underground Hotline (Missouri only) at 1-800-DIG-RITE. The appropriate utility will send someone out, within a few days, to mark the location(s) of any underground lines present.

The bottom line: Never touch a utility line; Don't even get close. And Never let anything you're holding touch or get close to a line.

LET'S BE CAREFUL OUT THERE !!!!!!

That Green Box In The Yard
Sunday, January 25th, 2009

Ever noticed a green metal box in your yard? What does it do, and why is it in *your yard*!!!? If your home is located in a newer subdivision or development, chances are your electric service is underground. You'll know it's underground if there are no overhead lines to be found and if you have a green (usually) transformer box like that shown in the illustration below. The transformer box contains equipment that *transforms* (imagine that) the electrical current that comes from the power company (and which

cannot be used by the electrical systems in your home) into the alternating currents that are compatible with your homes wiring system(s). It's a pretty important piece of equipment and may actually serve more homes than yours, so it could also be very important to several neighbors on your block.

But, "It's in *my yard*, and it's ugly, what can I do to cover it up?" This may be the initial instinct, if one is a responsible homeowner who cares about how their property is maintained and appears aesthetically. That instinct may result in an effort to cover the box with shrubs or fences, but the utility company must have easy access to the box to perform regular maintenance or restore power. When their choice is between protecting your service (and maybe your neighbors service as well), or your plantings, your electrical service comes first. They may have to remove or damage shrubs or fencing.

Before you plant any shrub, consider its size at maturity. Make sure it won't grow within five feet of the transformers sides, or within ten feet of the front. Do the same with fencing. This will ensure your landscapes security and beauty for years to come. The illustration below provides these general guidelines (Kansas City Power & Light illustration).