

# What Are the Best Trees Under Which to Plant?

Will Ferrell—Kernersville, North Carolina

We do not always have a choice about the kind of trees under which we grow our beloved woodland plants. But when we do, there arises the question: Which trees are optimal?

“None” is probably the best answer. Afternoon shade on the north or east side of your tall house or a tall garden wall is probably the most favorable site of all—if you manage any possible lime leaching from masonry. For example, a variegated Japanese maple (*‘Beni shichihenge’*) that I planted in such a situation grew much more vigorously than one I observed growing with only moderate root competition in an open woodland.

Having said that, I loved trees before I loved azaleas, and I adore woodland gardens. Permit me to share this tangential bit of good tidings: The Moravians settling the area of piedmont North Carolina in which I live—they called it Wachovia—catalogued all the varieties of trees growing here in the 1760s. All those varieties are still living here 250 years later.

Answering the question of which trees are friendlier to under-planting is fraught with subjectivity. The answers that I put forth are more suggestive than definitive, but are based on some years of observation and questioning of others with particular knowledge.

Tulip poplar seems to be an excellent tree under which to grow, though its big leaves have potential to smother tiny plants when they fall in the autumn. On the other hand, long-leaf or loblolly pines provide an ideal mulch and seem very friendly to under-planting. Their negative is that a pure stand of them produces intolerable spring pollen. Black gums seem excellent also and often provide truly beautiful fall color as a bonus. I think my optimal woodland would have a combination of these three trees, limbed up as far as practical.

White oaks are thought to be relatively good trees to underplant. In my experience, red oaks are okay but not great, providing substantial root competition. Willow oaks seem to be the worst of the oak family. Acorns of all can present a nuisance.

Two trees with outstanding blooms appear to me to be good candidates for underplanting: Chinese fringetree and yellow-wood. The latter, whose panicles evoke fairy tales, can be bloom-shy and should not be planted where it will be much shaded by other trees.

Persimmon trees do not seem too bad. Green and white ash are pretty good in my observation, though be aware that they leaf out a little later, as does the decorative sourwood, and therefore would not protect any early or mid-season blooms from sun deterioration. Ashes also can have some disease problems when stressed.

Although I’ve read contrary opinion, an American



Photo Will Ferrell

▲ These azaleas (*‘Willie May’*, *‘Herbert’*, and *‘Admiral Semmes’*) are growing under Tulip Poplar and Red Oak trees.

▼ This Ilam deciduous azalea *‘Peachy Keen’* grows under Tulip Poplar.



Photo Will Ferrell

elm and tall limbed-up dogwood seem tolerably good to under-plant. I’m less sure about the graceful winged elm or the excellent Chinese elm. Ginkgo trees seem reasonably friendly to under-planting.

Putatively the worst trees to plant under are probably black walnut, the noble American beech, and maples—though I have observed successful exceptions with all three. Pignut hickories in my experience are difficult to grow under. I have wondered if pignut hickories don’t share the chemical effect of the walnut, if not through its roots, perhaps through its nuts. Shagbark hickory seems a little better. The beautiful fall color and indestructibility of the sweet-gum does not make it a good candidate, even without considering its spiny fruit. Ironwoods also seem to provide



Photo Will Ferrell

▲ An individual Yellowwood panicle with a *Rhododendron calendulaceum* in the background.

significant root competition. Little-leaf linden and Zelkova are also unfavorable.

Well, at worst perhaps, I have initiated a conversation on a useful subject. I would invite you, the readers, to comment via letters to the editor with your insights or experiences. ASA members are uniquely able to provide guidance to a topic professional horticulturalists do not appear to have addressed. A serious rhododendron grower once told me he grew azaleas under eastern red-cedar, which intrigues me and makes me curious to see his garden.

Before leaving the subject, it probably behooves me to mention a couple of points that may not be obvious to the novice shade gardener. There is something to be said for removing any unnecessary trees, even if they are the friendlier types mentioned above. This is especially true if they block morning sun. A few well-spaced majestic limbed-up trees is probably ideal, both to minimize root competition and reduce shade density. Personally, I am too paranoid to follow this advice completely; I fear that future lightning strike or hurricane too much to not have a few trees of the next generation around.

I do want to emphasize the benefits of limbing up as much as is practical on both favorable and unfavorable trees. When first I began to think on this subject, I thought more in terms of root structure and competition. However, I've noticed that in general the difficult trees are the ones which create dense shade (e.g., maple, American beech, little-leaf linden, willow oak). I have observed examples of these trees having been aggressively limbed up and plants being successfully grown under them. So raise that canopy up with a passion.

Another common sense generalization: When you start amending an area under a tree to plant your azalea, pay attention to what density of roots you encounter. If they

## Scientific Tree Names

- Tulip poplar — *Liriodendron tulipifera*
- Long-leaf pine — *Pinus palustris*
- Loblolly pine — *Pinus taeda*
- Black gum or Black tupelo — *Nyssa sylvatica*
- White oak — *Quercus alba*
- Red oak — *Quercus rubra*
- Willow oak — *Quercus phellos*
- Chinese fringetree — *Chionanthus retusus*
- Ginkgo — *Ginkgo biloba*
- Yellow-wood — *Cladastris kentuckea/lutea*
- Persimmon — *Diospyros virginiana*
- Green ash — *Fraxinus pennsylvanica*
- White ash — *Fraxinus americana*
- Sourwood — *Oxydendrum arboreum*
- American elm — *Ulmus americana*
- Dogwood — *Cornus florida*
- Winged elm — *Ulmus alata*
- Chinese elm — *Ulmus parviflora*
- Black walnut — *Juglans nigra*
- American beech — *Fagus grandiflora*
- Maples — *Acer*
- Pignut hickory — *Carya glabra*
- Shagbark hickory — *Carya ovata*
- Sweet-gum — *Liquidambar styraciflua*
- Ironwood/American hornbeam — *Carpinus caroliniana*
- Little-leaf linden — *Tilia cordata*
- Zelkova — *Zelkova serrata*
- Eastern red cedar — *Juniperus virginiana*

are fierce, consider another site because those roots will love your amended soil. Some times you will find a more favorable spot closer to the trunk of a mature tree (inside the circumference of primary feeder roots).

If you get an abundance of rain, all of this matters significantly less. Lucky you!

*Note: In thinking about this article, I have questioned and consulted a large number of gardeners. Particularly helpful to me were Dr. Larry Mellichamp of the University of North Carolina Charlotte; gardener extraordinaire Graham Ray; and Michael Dirr's **Manual of Woody Landscape Plants**.*

**Will Ferrell** is a semi-retired dentist whose interests include gardening, history, economics, ideas, and music.