

Four-season Trees

SIMPLY TREES February 2014

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Just about any tree, even the less attractive ones, can be said to offer multi-season interest. The lowly Siberian elm, for example, is interesting if for no other reason than it grows here. It may be a stretch to say it's a good-looking tree, but it's certainly interesting. Many other unappealing species also fit this bill, including tree-of-heaven, boxelder maple and mulberry. Interestingly, the redcedar is considered an ugly tree by many people even though it's the only native evergreen in our region. And yet if it wasn't so common and weedy, we'd probably be celebrating its attractive peeling bark, its bright blue berries, its evergreen foliage and the fact that it supports a plethora of wildlife. The old saying that "beauty is in the eye of the beholder" certainly applies to many trees.



Although personal preferences for specific tree attributes can vary significantly among people, it's obvious that some trees are just better at catching our eyes than others. Many are neon-studded showoffs shouting "hey look at me!" with their brightly colored spring flowers—trees like redbud, magnolia, hawthorns, crabapples and dogwoods. And of course everyone seems to like the trees that color up nicely in the fall when their leaves magically transform from green to various shades of orange, yellow and red. Red maple, sugar maple, white oak, white ash and green ash are a few that come to mind.

Most trees are one-trick or maybe two-trick ponies when it comes to showing off. That is, they have one or two key attributes that catch our attention during the year, but the rest of the time they are generally blending in. There are a few species, however, that are able to combine unique attributes of color, form, texture, fragrance and even sound to keep us looking from season to season. These are often referred to as trees with "four-season" interest. Here are a just a few worth mentioning:

- **Black Oak** is native to much of the eastern United States, including the hardwood forests of eastern Nebraska. In the spring, black oaks can be picked out of the woods by their velvety young leaves that emerge shimmering pink before unfurling to a deep, glossy green. These leaves are some of the shiniest in the forest and help distinguish the species from the closely related but duller red oak. In the fall, black oak leaves reliably turn shades of red to maroon, before fading to a shiny brown by December; and they can hang on the tree throughout winter. Finally, the deeply furrowed and "blackish" bark of a maturing black oak is attractive year-round. This oak deserves much greater planting in our landscapes.
- **Shagbark Hickory** is also native to our eastern Nebraska hardwood forests and is often found in association with black oak. As its name implies, the tree is best known for its shaggy bark that exfoliates in long, coarse strips as it matures, making this a fairly easy tree to identify in the winter. One of the most fascinating visual treats of this tree is the way its dormant winter buds quickly expand and practically burst open when new leaves are ready to emerge in the spring. It's truly a sight to behold. The tree's large compound leaves waste no time maturing to a bright green throughout the summer before turning a nice pumpkin yellow in the fall. This is a GREAT and underutilized native tree.
- **Serviceberries** are terrific small trees that prefer to be planted with the protection of larger trees or where late afternoon shade can be found, but they are quite tolerant of sunny spots as well. At least two species are native to our region. The attractiveness of serviceberry flows from season to season beginning with a nice white, but never gaudy, flower display in early spring followed by small tasty fruits that mature to a tasty dark-blue by June. The glossy, finely-serrated leaves are attractive all summer and turn to shades of apricot, orange or red in the fall, depending on the species. The tree's multi-stem habit and smooth gray bark is attractive throughout the winter. Before planting another pear or crabapple, consider planting a serviceberry.

Many other species could be added to this list including white oak (attractive bark and red fall color), baldcypress (peeling bark and orange fall color), sycamore (ghostly white/mottled trunk and branches), yellowwood (creamy flower panicles and smooth bark), ponderosa pine (incredible cinnamon-peppered bark and evergreen nature) and paper bark maple (papery bark, red fall color) to name a few. Do yourself a favor and watch your favorite trees change over the coming year. Some changes are subtle, others are pronounced—but they are all fascinating.