

## **Plan...Plan...Plant!**

**By Kathleen Cue, Nebraska Extension Horticulture Educator**

In carpentry, there is an old adage urging us to measure twice and cut once. The same can be said when it comes to plants. Planning is the least expensive of the plant selection process, simply requiring a little of our time to talk to experts and glean information from catalogs and web sources. I've never had a client say, "Gosh, I'm really sorry I planned and did the research!" Rather, I hear from clients who didn't adequately plan and are now dealing with how to help plants survive or costly removals.

Most plant failures come from a shortfall in adequate information. A sibling was ready to plant a Japanese maple in their front yard, the site of new construction with poor soils and little in the way of wind blockage, until someone (me!) mentioned this wouldn't work. Knowing which plants can handle the rough places and which need more protection plays a huge role in plant selection.

Another example of inadequate planning is when plant success creates an issue, such as the cute little blue spruce planted next to the driveway. That little tree that was so adorable is now covering the driveway and obstructing the driver's site line for vehicle and pedestrian traffic. I once watched a neighbor struggle with this very issue, first pruning out the lower limbs and then disliking the result so much that the tree was removed. A \$1000 bill later fixed the safety problem but not without cost to the wallet and loss of a healthy and handsome tree.

Nebraska Extension experts, Extension publications, garden catalogs and garden centers are good places to start. When doing a Web search, type in the subject followed by the phrase "site:.edu" to narrow the search to research-based information. The closer the area is to your location, the better fit for your own growing conditions. Keep in mind that listed plant dimensions are for optimum growing conditions, which the Midwest is not, so figure 80% of that number will give a better indication of the height and width of the plant, allowing you to space plants accordingly.

Be aware of glowing terms that don't give a true picture of what the plant is like. "Spreading" can be another word for rampant or invasive. The terms "compact" or "dwarf" are relative terms, meaning that a compact burning bush is not a neat and tidy two foot tall shrub. It simply means a compact burning bush will be smaller than a regular burning bush (which grows to eight feet tall and wide!)

New projects are a great time to address soil conditions and the grade of slopes, which are very difficult to correct after plants are planted. Adding compost to loosen clay soils and beef up sandy ones should be done early to ensure plant success. Changing the grade should be done early, too, to keep from damaging the roots of established plants. By doing the research early, you'll be better informed to discard ideas for bringing in or removing soil around established trees, which can kill them.