

Answers to
gardening questions

Trees in the garden

By R. W. Sidwell

No forms of plant life arouse feelings quite as strongly as do trees. Specialist growers might wax lyrically over their orchids or chrysanthemums but trees are on a different plane. Threaten to remove a tree for some road widening operation and a petition supported by local residents will soon be under way.

The tragic loss of our elms has instigated tree planting schemes throughout the country. Whilst one cannot help supporting tree planting in principle, more care in choosing sites and the tree for the site is sometimes called for. The fact is that big trees want a lot of room. A cedar of Lebanon belongs in a park or large garden, not in the front garden of a modern semi.

One has to get one's time scale right. Many people planting in gardens are quite happy to think of the next ten to fifteen years. In planting an oak tree a century is not long and although we cannot, of course, know what future generations will do to the trees, we should try to plant large forest trees where there is some chance that they will attain maturity. So beeches, oaks, horse chestnuts and limes are best kept for parks, town squares or as shade trees for livestock.

If one takes a serious interest in growing vegetables then shade from trees must be avoided. As gardens are tending to get smaller there may be little room for trees that will cast heavy shade. I have clear recollections from the war years, of Vale market gardeners, whose land adjoined farm land with a row of elms in the boundary hedge, making desperate efforts to have the trees felled because shade and root activity made large areas of ground uncroppable. Oddly enough I cannot recall seeing any reference to the potential increase in home food production which could follow the loss of the elms.

It is easy, after visiting Westonbirt or Batsford to feel inspired and to want to plant trees everywhere but



Plants under trees must be able to tolerate some shade.

the truth is that that sort of planting can only be done at places like Westonbirt and Batsford.

In the garden we must look for trees which will relieve the monotony of low growing plants without interfering too much with the other things we want to grow. The trees must be in scale with our operations.

During this century the most popular small trees in English gardens have been the ornamental cherries, crab apples and cherry plums. They are the mark of suburbia and provide brilliant displays of blossom in the spring, often attractive fruits and autumn colour. But they have been rather overdone and there is a strong movement today to look for something a little less blatant.

The genus sorbus fills this need to some degree. The two natives, whitebeam (*Sorbus aria*) and mountain ash (*S. aucuparia*) are deservedly popular. They have relatives which are even more desirable. "Joseph

Rock" is a Chinese mountain ash of uncertain origin. It was collected by Rock, an American plant collector, in the early part of this century. This has rich yellow fruits and brilliant autumn colour. Two others of merit are *S. hupehense* and *S. vilmorinii* also from China. Both have elegant foliage and fruits whitish tinged with pink or purple.

If a tree is wanted with a wide, dense umbrella type of head *Crataegus prunifolia* might meet the need. This is now widely used as a street tree. It has shining green leaves, plenty of long persisting fruits and good autumn colour.

The common weeping willow is no plant for the small garden but, if a weeping willow is required, why not try *Salix purpurea pendula*, a gem of a small tree. Grown on a six foot leg its branches will reach the ground and make a little "den" which children will love.

Provided they are not overdone

there is a place in gardens for fastigate trees. That is trees whose branches grow upright instead of spreading. I am not thinking of Lombardy poplar which is really a bit too much. Nor necessarily have I in mind the cherry "Amanagawa," excellent and deliciously scented though it is, but why not try a fastigate oak or beech where a fairly large erect growing tree can be accommodated?

The fastigate hornbeam is not egg-shaped, fastigate but forms an egg-shaped, dense and very regular in outline. The truly fastigate one is known as "columnaris" but this is not easy to obtain.

For elegance, few trees equal the birches. Our native silver birch (*Betula pendula*) adds grace to any garden and if extra white bark is wanted try the Asiatic species *B. jacquemonti*. Two others very desirable are *B. ermanii* and *B. utilis*, with variable bark colour, often pinky or orange brown.