

Published December 17th, 2014

## Signature Trees Speak for Themselves

By Chris Lavin



A Japanese maple brightens up the exterior of this home. Photo Jennifer Wake

manager for Orchard Nursery in Lafayette, who has helped hundreds of Lamorindans make the right decision. "It can make a huge difference in how your house looks, how to present your house to others."

Walk back into the nursery with Olmstead and one starts to get barraged by Latin names that don't help someone who doesn't know a borealis from a gigantum. (Those probably aren't even trees.) That doesn't deter Olmstead, though, because he is capable of quickly changing to regular-person-speak.

"So first, how big would you want it to get?" he asks. When told, let's say, about 100 feet, he throws back his head and laughs loudly. "Really? I don't think too many trees get that tall, not even oaks. Redwoods will. People think they want redwoods but they don't really want redwoods."

Which of course leads a person who is still amazed that the spell-check on the computer accepted "borealis" to an obvious question for Mr. Olmstead: Why not? (She means, sequoia sempervirens, two of only two Latin words she knows, is just about the most spectacular tree ever to take root in Lamorindan soil.) Who could argue with a coast redwood?

"People think they're evergreen, that they're going to be low maintenance," Olmstead says. "They're like the ..." And he is obviously resisting using more Latin, so like the good people-person he is, he changes tack and goes back to English. "Redwoods are not low-maintenance," he reports.

For one, redwoods shed their leaves, too. Sure, some people call them needles but they amount to the same thing. Trees have to be maintained. They can't be planted somewhere under dubious soil circumstances and then fall down, say, and kill somebody. They can't wiggle their roots into other people's water pipes or sewage systems. People who plant trees have responsibilities, Olmstead says: They have to keep them healthy, clean up after them, and be responsible for them when they're young, care for them as they mature. It begins to feel as if one is talking to a sex education counselor about responsible parenting.

So what do you plant if you want that magical effect?

"You start with how big," he says, going back to the beginning, then he takes a big breath and his eyes almost start to well up. His passion for trees becomes obvious. "Deciduous trees are probably the best bet. You get everything with deciduous. Spectacular spring blossoms, bright green in the summer with shade, than fall color. You really can't beat deciduous trees."

While many homeowners take painstaking care to keep their lawns and properties in top curb-appeal condition - or at least make every attempt to keep them that way - sometimes it's the lone tree that takes charge, calls us to attention, and alerts us to its spectacular presence. The house itself is secondary. These are "signature trees," trees that define their landscape, put the house in perspective.

Like seeing the splash from a Japanese maple that could not possibly be that true to the color red and simply must have been painted on by the fire department, trees can create the "wow" effect like nothing else in the front of a home. Gone are the yard ornaments, the trimmed lawn, the potted azalea or the wreaths on the door. The tree stands alone.

"The decision to plant a particular tree is really important," says Geoff Olmstead, the nursery

Some people will plant collections, Olmstead explains. Like birches, in sets of three, "for faith, hope and charity." And yes, he says, you have to rake the leaves. You have to watch out for the fruits that fall, which can be tedious to get rid of, especially when they're knarly, like sycamores and others. Yes, you have to water it, preferably with a drip system that's slow and deep off and on for a year or two - he will give you the amounts and times and everything else - and yes, they aren't that pretty in the wintertime. But, he adds, "it's winter."

Still, the time comes to pay for the spectacular presentation of a nice tree. Erach Tapore of Michael Lane in Lafayette was found recently raking leaves quickly and dumping them into giant bags to get ready for an incoming storm. When asked why he bothered with a tree he had to care for, his face lit up: "This is a Modesto ash! They are beautiful trees, planted all along here," he says, motioning up the lane. He has cared for his tree for more than 30 years, he says, and feels as if he has a relationship with it. He has it pruned every five to 10 years, and worries a bit about the mistletoe that's taken hold high in its branches. He doesn't mind doing the raking.

"I had to do it," says Tarapore, holding his rake. "The tree will say, 'I see you!' And I know I have to do something. This is what I have to do today."



Erach Tarapore rakes his leaves on Michael Lane in Lafayette. He has taken care of his Modesto ash for more than 30 years.



A beautiful oak on Burton Drive in Lafayette doesn't have to define a single house -- it defines the whole neighborhood. Photos Chris Lavin





Trees don't have to define the house. They also can provide swings with a needed branch.

Reach the reporter at: [info@lamorindaweekly.com](mailto:info@lamorindaweekly.com)

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA