

Can you Save Our Tree?

One of the things that make plants so great, is being able to share them with our friends and family to commemorate an event or memory. I know one of my favorite plants is a peace lily that I received from my Grandfather's funeral. I really do not care for peace lilies that much otherwise, because they really do not provide much interest. I also have a jade plant from my Great-grandmother. I remember how amazed I was with her plant. It was absolutely huge, spanning half the length of her entire kitchen, it was a center piece in her house that stood in front of a plate-glass window.

We can share plants too, not just house plants. Among some of the easiest are probably fig trees and muscadines. These are incredibly easy to propagate from cuttings or by layering. How many of us remember that massive grape arbor at our parent's or grandparent's house when we were young?

Speaking of family and friends, our family had a new Thanksgiving tradition that started this year, a family run/walk/bicycle/golf cart 5K. With Covid spiking, one of our cousins came up with a great idea for an outdoor family get-together where we could all see one another, eat yummy foods, and then exercise all while keeping a safe distance. While there, one of the conversations that came up was about a plum tree that was roughly 35 years old. The tree is in severe decline and the family wanted to be able to save it. Unfortunately, I believe the tree is beyond that stage, it really sounds as though it had a really good life! But, that doesn't mean that there is nothing we can do.

All those years ago, this plum tree was established from a root sprout off of another tree growing at a family member's home. My family really wanted to be able to keep this tree but the next best thing is to establish new trees from this one, keeping the same plums going in the family. There are several ways to go about making new trees. The easiest is to pull any sprouts growing off of the roots which is how this tree was established in the first place. But what if there aren't any root sprouts? Some trees like our fig mentioned above, we can use air layering or simple layering. Air layering uses a wound on a branch that is then wrapped with water soaked Spanish moss and then covered with tinfoil and sealed on both ends. This is left for the season and then checked at the end of the season. The plant will have a root response over the course of the season making a plant that is ready to cut off of the mother plant and planted in a pot. Simple layering is perhaps the easiest means of propagating a new plant, especially a fig. Simply cover a low hanging branch with soil or even a brick and the plant will respond by rooting. At the end of the season, this new plant can be transplanted into a new location or a pot to share with family and friends.

There are still other ways that will work well for a plum and many other fruit trees. One way is to collect budwood from the tree and then graft onto a rootstock. Nearly all fruit trees are grown on rootstock for one reason or another. In apples, rootstock controls size, with plums and peaches it is to guard against nematodes or wet feet. There are many different ways to graft as well. In apples, we might graft an entire scion (our budwood or one-year-old wood) onto the rootstock. We can also top graft a tree. To do this, the original tree may be cut down to a stump and then a scion, or several scions will be grafted onto the tree. There are novelty trees that have had several different varieties grafted onto one tree for sale in many catalogues. This is done the same way. We can also bud-graft our trees. This is simply replacing a bud on our rootstock with a bud from our favorite tree.

The best way to do this on our plum tree is to use a particular type of bud-graft called a T-bud. The T-bud has a very high degree of success, even for amateur grafters like me. On our rootstock we would use a sharp knife to make a vertical slit in the stem of the rootstock. Now, make a horizontal slit on top of your first cut to form a capital "T" shape. Use your knife to gently loosen the bark around your cuts. Next, cut a bud off of your donor tree in the shape of a knight's shield. Insert the shield into the rootstock you have prepared and then wrap it with grafting tape allowing the bud to remain exposed. Once the new bud begins to grow, you can cut the top of your rootstock off and you have a complete fruit tree to plant or share.

There are a few companies that will do some of this work for you. One such company is Century Orchard Farms in Reidsville, NC. You can find them by doing a simple google search. You collect the budwood and they will custom graft your trees. They grow them out for the season and then send them to you at the right time for planting. They also sell many varieties of heirloom fruit trees, particularly apples.

If you have a fruit tree that has been in the family for a long time, don't fret, there are many ways to share this plant with your children or grandchildren!

If you are having an issue in your home garden or landscape, send your questions to Gene Fox, Consumer Horticulture Agent with the North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service, please email at Gene at gene_fox@ncsu.edu. Learn more on Facebook at the Blacklands Area Horticulture page or visit the Extension Office located at 155 Airport Road in Washington, NC!