

Landscape Design

SETBACK PLANTING

What does that mean?

- **Setback planting refers to the practice of placing street trees behind the sidewalk and out of the right-of-way.**
- Trees purchased with public funds are normally planted on public property, and it often seems at first glance to be “wrong” or “impossible” to put them anywhere else.

Why would anyone want to do setback planting?

- **Public trees placed behind the right-of-way on private land remain healthier, live longer, stay safer, and cost less in the long run.**

- There are many reasons why trees behind the sidewalk do better:

greater rooting volume: more soil for the roots generally means a healthier tree, because more water and nutrients are available.

less pruning: setback trees interfere much less with wires and roads, resulting in less pruning and fewer opportunities for decay.

lower stress: trees away from the streets and highways will not be as affected by road salt, compaction, or heat load.

better early care: during the critical years after transplanting, trees on private property tend to receive more attention and less abuse.

- What matters most is to convince people that planting public trees on private property behind the sidewalk lies in the common interest of the community.

How is such planting possible? Isn't it against the law or something?

- **There is no single way that communities get this done.**
- Some communities use *easements*, treating the tree like a sort of utility pole.
- Other communities fill out a very short *written agreement* with homeowners.
- Still others have *no formal mechanism*, they just do it and nobody complains.
- But in all cases, keep it simple. It takes **communication, understanding, and negotiation** between homeowners and local officials for setback planting to work.

Who takes care of setback trees?

- **Again, arrangements vary from community to community.**
- Some communities prefer to treat setback trees like all other ROW trees. Public workers maintain them, and the community is liable for any damage that occurs.
- Other communities turn the trees completely over to the homeowner after planting, so that the community has no future responsibility.
- Combinations of these alternatives exist too! Communities need to decide what they need.

Where is setback planting of particular value?

- *Narrow tree lawns* that provide little rooting volume.
- *High salt areas* that stress trees with drought and kill their young tissues.
- *Sites with low overhead wires* that force repeated massive pruning.



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Underwire Trees

What are these trees?

- **Underwire trees are ones that can be easily kept out of the primary distribution lines.**
- The best are those that grow only to 25-30' and so never need utility pruning at all.

Why does it matter?

- **Choosing the right trees for underwire planting brings:**
 - greater safety** by eliminating the possibility of climbing into the wires
 - lower maintenance costs** from frequent pruning and power outages
 - more reliability** on uninterrupted electric service to customers
 - fewer potential hazards** from repeated wounding and subsequent decay
 - no misshapen trees** from topping, one-sided cuts, or center removal
- Set-back planting--placing public trees back from the right-of-way onto private property--is another option.

What are some good species for a northeast US urban environment?

- **Examples** of trees suitable for underwire use include:
 - Hedge maple (*Acer campestre*)
 - Robin Hill serviceberry (*Amelanchier x grandiflora* 'Robin Hill')
 - Winter King hawthorn (*Crataegus viridis* 'Winter King')
 - Goldenrain tree (*Koelreuteria paniculata*)
 - Amur Maackia (*Maackia amurensis*)
 - Professor Sprenger crabapple (*Malus* 'Professor Sprenger')
 - Hophornbeam (*Ostrya virginiana*)
 - Ivory Silk tree lilac (*Syringa reticulata* 'Ivory Silk')
- Check the cultural requirements of these trees before selecting them for your site.

What varieties should be avoided for underwire planting?

- **Any medium or large tree that will grow quickly into the wires.**
- Trees that require high maintenance, like many crabapples and cherries.

Where can I buy the recommended species?

- Some are available at good regional nurseries, but check them against your stock specifications.
- Otherwise, order from the catalogue of a reputable tree nursery, best 6 months in advance.



Japanese tree lilac planted beneath power lines