Book Review: Forest and Shade Trees of Iowa

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Book Review

FOREST AND SHADE TREES OF IOWA — by Peter J. Van Der Linden and Donald R. Farrar. Iowa State University Press, Ames. 128 pp. $25.00 hardbound, $14.95 paper.

This book was written for a wide audience ranging from homeowners to professional educators. It contains as complete a listing of Iowa trees as can be found. The tree identification keys and the literal description of each species provide good information for anyone interested in trees. Of particular benefit is the inclusion of a statement about similar appearing trees. This feature should prove quite useful for the novice.

Chapter 1 is a light-reading summary of Iowa's forests. The authors contend that Iowa's woodland increased dramatically after settlement, that new woodlands were created by settlers, and that there is still more woodland in parts of central Iowa than when the area was settled. This interesting observation could benefit from some documentation. The inclusion of autumn color and mycorrhizae in Chapter 1 does not seem related to Iowa's forest history or plant communities, but these sections do make for interesting, informative reading.

Chapter 2 contains only cursory information about selecting and transplanting trees. When to transplant is covered in just two sentences. Of prime importance to this chapter are Tables 2.1 and 2.2, which list species recommended for planting in Iowa. These tables are helpful in noting different types and sizes of plants which can be used in Iowa for a variety of purposes — windbreaks, wildlife plantings, landscaping, and more. The authors omitted pin oak and honeylocust, perhaps because of problems with them and others which they describe on page 8. Although the desirability of these two species is questionable, there are many nurserymen, landscape architects, and homeowners who maintain their loyalty to them. Disagreements with these tables are minor and perhaps no more than personal opinion. Bur oak, for example, could have been included as a wet site species. Similarly, bald cypress is capable of surviving dry sites. Red cedar might be a better wet site species than arborvitae. Austrian pine, because of its high susceptibility to needle blights, should be relegated only to wildlife plantings in western Iowa. A useful addition to the tables might have been a listing of trees recommended for downtown city sidewalk plantings.

Chapter 3 is helpful in defining descriptive botanical terms. Van Der Linden and Farrar have done a good job of explaining the important advantages of scientific plant names, and their line drawings and italicized key words make this a particularly useful section for the amateur dendrologist.

Most of Forest and Shade Trees of Iowa is in Chapter 4. Here more than 130 tree species and nearly 20 large woody shrubs are described often with useful clues to help in identification. Native ranges are described, and black and white photos accompany most of the species discussions. A black and white strip attached for scale to tree trunks in most of the photos is not mentioned in the introduction nor legends. It appears to be 12 inches, but this should be stipulated somewhere.

Although the authors give Russian olive high marks, in fact it is very subject to disfiguration and death from canker organisms on any but very dry sites. Their high rating of Austrian pine would also seem open to question. In pointing out black walnut's preference for deep, well-drained soils, Van Der Linden and Farrar are guilty of fostering the cliché that, "Good corn land is good walnut land."

Included in the tree section of Chapter 4 are sumac and dogwood which, with the exception of flowering dogwood, Cornus florida, might more appropriately have been listed with the native and naturalized shrubs at the end of the chapter. These species are usually less than 3 inches in diameter and less than 12 feet in height.

The book concludes with Chapters 5 and 6, the tree keys for both summer and winter identification. The general key is followed by keys for each of the larger families. Line drawings which accompany the keys add to their utility. Coupled with the definitions of Chapter 3 and the descriptions of Chapter 4, these keys yield excellent identification of Iowa's trees and shrubs.

Forest and Shade Trees of Iowa is a valuable tool for either the professional or the non-professional. — Robert H. Hibbs, District Forester, Iowa Conservation Commission, Box 681, Marshalltown, IA 50158.

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