

DESIGNING TREES FOR KIDS

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Nearly all trees grown by wholesale nurseries and offered for sale have been staked and all lower limbs removed up four to six feet or more. Removal of lower limbs contributes greatly to the weak stems and need for staking ---- but that's another story!

Currently, I know of no nursery devoting even a small percentage of their production to Trees For Kids. Kids love to climb and what better and more natural object than a tree? While climbing a tree, kids get to know the tree; color and texture of the bark, whether pieces of bark can be easily removed and the color beneath, angle of branch attachment, stiffness or flexibility of young branches, leaves, flowers, seeds and so on. Growing up on rented farms around southeast Kansas, with each move, I would check out the tree population and determine the best ones for climbing and where I might build my next tree house. Several of these memorable climbing trees were mulberries. Mulberries unmolested in the wild typically have good branch structure and spacing for climbing. And to climb six to 10 feet or more off the ground and pick and eat ripe fruit was memorable.

To climb a tree and be several feet off the ground gives anyone a new perspective, but especially kids --- like climbing to the top of a castle wall to view work of the peasants, or positions of attacking warriors. And, it was private! What a great place to sit and think, plan, dream, cogitate, let the imagination run wild, --- whatever.

And a tree large enough and with branch structure to support a tree house, even just the most primitive platform consisting of a few boards, --- was the ultimate. My view has always been that any tree would readily forgive a few nails inserted to secure steps. Think of it as giving the tree a few minuscule shots of iron.

I believe there is a market for trees designed just for kids. When a son, daughter, or grandchild is born, if a 2.5 to 3 inch stem diameter, Kids Tree, is planted, by the time the child approaches age four, they can begin to climb in and begin to know a tree. And there is a substantial market of grandparents looking for the ultimate long lasting gift. Have you ever watched a grandmother shop for a grandchild? Everything is under consideration and price is a minor factor.

A good climbing tree for kids should have a first limb no more than two feet off the ground and additional branches spaced 12 to 24 inches up the stem and radially. Elms, most oaks, mulberries, ash and some maples work well. Birch, willow and some other species have slender and flexible limbs that provide poor footing. Walnut and pecan should be avoided as dead limbs one to 1.5 inches in diameter have a similar appearance to healthy limbs and can be hazardous.

My good friend, Alex Shigo, always emphasized "Touch Trees" as a message to all listeners. If we focused more on providing trees that kids could touch and climb in and enjoy, the likelihood of having misbehaving juveniles later would decline. Plant trees, "Touch Trees", Enjoy Trees!



Figure 1 shows my twin grandsons in a Siberian elm in their backyard in southern Wisconsin. The Siberian elm was chosen and planted because of the strong wood, cold hardiness and general toughness (soil on the site is terrible). This particular tree came from my breeding program where development of a central leader and sound branch structure are key considerations. Where branches connect to the main stem, bark is worn from heavy use.



Figure 2. Live oaks in the wild typically branch low to the ground and make great climbing trees. If nurseries would only allow a few trees in their production to develop naturally, great climbing, Kids Trees would result.