

Q: Contra Costa County's climate change recommendations include planting a few trees around your home. I live in East Contra Costa, with very little soil on my hillside. What kind of trees could I plant that could help?

A: Planting a couple of trees around your home can reduce your carbon output by 20 pounds a year, and if the trees can be situated on the south-west side of your home, they will also help reduce your need for cooling in the summer months, lowering your energy bill. However, choosing a tree is a bit like choosing a spouse—this is a long term relationship. There are number of factors you need to consider: Deciduous trees will allow winter sun to warm your home. Evergreen trees block winter light. A tree with broad leaves tend to burn less readily, and will reduce fire risk. Conifers such as pines are highly flammable and burn readily. Consider the rooting depth and site proximity to sewer lines and pipes. Rapid growing trees tend to be brittle and more susceptible to limb loss. What is your soil pH? How much water will be available? Trees that are best adapted will be able to survive in our Mediterranean climate with little supplemental water once they are established. Are there overhead powerlines that you need to be aware of? Once you take all these factors into consideration, you also need to think about the practical aspects of living with this tree. Will it need pruning, and can you do it yourself? How tall will it get over what period of time? How large are the leaves and will they compost easily? Does the tree bloom? What color, and does it attract bees? What color might the leaves turn in autumn? What does the winter silhouette look like? How will this tree affect your neighbors? Will the pollen exacerbate hay allergies? Does anyone in your household have allergies to specific trees? What does the tree smell like? Some of this information can be gleaned from the SELECTREE site at <http://selecttree.calpoly.edu/>. Once you have answered these questions, take the information to your local nursery, and find out which trees they carry that match your needs. Choose a nursery with California Certified Nursery Professionals to help you.