

## What's the difference between a tree and a shrub?

*Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service — Galveston County Office*



PHOTO BY William M. Johnson

Banana trees are grown by local gardeners and will produce fruit when favorable weather conditions occur. While we call them banana trees, they do not produce any woody growth. The banana plant is not a tree, but the world's largest perennial herb.

Q: What's the difference between a tree and a shrub?

A: An interesting question that would seem to have a one-size-fit-all answer. If we look at only the most obvious examples, there would be no debate over the difference between trees and shrubs.

Nobody would look at mature oak trees and call them "shrubs." Nor would anyone mistake Indian Hawthorne shrubs for trees. But we're dealing

with Mother Nature here and the distinction is not always clear-cut.

We are challenged when we try to categorize everything under neat black-and-white headings that humans feel most comfortable with.

The generally acknowledged definition of a tree is a "woody plant having one erect trunk at least three inches in diameter at a point 4 ½ feet above the ground, a definitely

formed canopy or crown of foliage, and a mature height of at least 13 feet."

In contrast, a shrub is characterized as a "woody plant with several perennial stems that may be erect or may lay close to the ground. It will usually have a height less than 13 feet and stems no more than about three inches in diameter."

The above descriptions provide sufficient dis-



June 18, 2014



Dr. William Johnson is a horticulturist with the Galveston County Office of Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service. Visit his website at <http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/galveston>.

*News column printed in the Galveston Daily News, The Post, and other Galveston County Newspapers.*

inctions to categorize most trees and shrubs in the landscape. As is true with most things in life, there will be the exceptions. Some trees may have multiple trunks—crape myrtles being a prime example. Some shrubs can be shaped into a small tree by training one trunk. One of my Master Gardener volunteers has shaped her red tip photinia to grow as a small tree.

And where do banana trees fit? While we call them banana trees, they do not produce any woody growth. The plants are among the world's largest plants without woody stems.

The banana is closely related to ginger and ornamental plants such as birds of paradise, amaranths and canna lilies. The banana plant is not a tree, but the world's largest perennial herb.

Q: I have a 4-year-old pecan tree in my back yard. As of right now it has no leaves on it and does not look like it is trying to get any. Do I need to worry about it being "dead"?

A: I know from experience to never say never on things horticulture-related.

However, given your description and since it is already mid-June, I think it very, very unlikely that the pecan tree will put on any new growth since it has not done so thus far. Pecan trees are deciduous (a term meaning "falling off at maturity" and typically used in reference to trees

or shrubs that lose their leaves seasonally — most commonly during autumn).

While pecans are typically among the last trees in a home landscape to establish new leaves in the spring, they should have put on some new growth by now. If a pecan fails to grow new leaves during a growing season, it will not survive.

Q: Is there any truth to the statements made about Canada Green's "Perfect Grass Seed" and Grassology's "Ultra Low Maintenance Grass Seed"?

A: I have not seen any university-conducted research trials conducted on either product. Both products are promoted as a breakthrough secret to a lush, green, lawn. Other claims state that homeowners will save tons of money, time and aggravation by using these grass seeds. More claims include no more high watering bills and no more weekly mowing.

American home improvement television show host Bob Vila is promoting the claims of Grassology's "Ultra Low Maintenance Grass Seed." So, forgive my cynicism and even with Bob Vila's endorsement, I remain skeptical. Unless and until I see unbiased research/field study data that reflect our local growing conditions, my advice is let the buyer beware.

At the very least it would be an expensive undertaking to establish a large yard. I really think

our Gulf Coast summer heat would present a serious challenge. But it would not be a bad idea or too major an investment to try a small scale test to see if my cynicism is unfounded.

Q: I would like to a build raised bed around my maple tree and grow flowers in the bed. Will this harm the tree?

A: I strongly recommend against changing the soil grade under the dripline of a tree. The roots can actually suffocate if you add soil over the top. Instead, why not grow plants in containers and group them near the base of your tree? You can even add a bench beneath the tree and set a few pots of colorful flowers on the bench.

