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-
tinctions 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.

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Q: I would like to build a 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.