

Small Trees, Big Style



Trees provide the bones or framework of well-designed gardens. Small trees — those under 30 feet tall at maturity — have become more important in today's shrinking residential landscape. Do you need to better define a space? A small tree can do the job. Smaller trees add charm to your yard. Their flowers, berries, bark, colorful fall foliage and branching structure can enhance a garden as a focal point.

Figuring Out the Why

Which small tree is the best one to plant? That depends on many different things, but first things first. Why do you want to plant a small tree?

- Do you want to provide a feeling of enclosure?
- Do you want to frame a desirable view?
- Maybe you need to screen out an undesirable view.
- Do you need shade for your patio?
- Perhaps you need an accent in a shrub border or at the end of a hedge.
- A grouping of small trees in a triangular or diagonal pattern can soften vertical lines on a corner of a house.
- Maybe you need to create a dramatic entry — small trees make wonderful gateposts.
- Do you want to see the tree from inside your house?

The answers to these questions direct the placement and selection of a small tree. Unlike perennials, trees don't like to be moved. Take care when considering their placement.

Figuring Out the Where

Once you know why you want a small tree, assess your site. Determine the characteristics of your intended location. Before selecting a tree, you need to consider the following:

Orientation — North, south, east or west?

Winds — Southwest winds in the summer or north winds in the winter?

Proximity to a building, fence or wall — This can alter the microclimate either one hardiness zone warmer or colder than normal.

Sun/shade patterns — Sun's intensity varies from morning to afternoon. Morning sun is preferred by many plants with shading in the hot afternoon.

Soil condition — Is it sticky like clay? Do you need to amend the soil?

Drainage — Are there runoff areas that carry large quantities of water during rainstorms?

Utility lines or meters in the area — Call 1-800-DIG-SAFE before planting.

Figuring Out the What

Once you have assessed the site for your small tree and decided on its placement, it is time to select a suitable variety. When selecting a variety of small tree, consider the factors on the next page.

Hardiness — Is it winter hardy to at least Zone 5?

Height and width at maturity — You need space for the roots and the crown to spread.

Growth rate — A fast growth rate is not always good. Fast growth usually produces weak wood and poor branch angles.

Form — How does it look without foliage? Is its branch structure and crown shape suited for your intended use and space?

Cultural requirements — The tree's light and soil needs should match your site's characteristics.

Proximity to large, mature trees — Large trees cast shade and compete for available moisture.

Ornamental qualities — Flowers? Interesting bark? Fruit? Fall color?

Disease problems — Buy disease-resistant varieties whenever possible.

Water requirements — Is it drought tolerant? Does it like wet soils?

Maintenance issues — Is it a messy tree? Does it drop fruits or a large amount of leaf and twig litter?

Time to Shop

Now that the decisions about the purpose, the site and the variety of small tree are made, it is time to make a purchase.

When purchasing a small tree for your garden, remember you are making an important long-term investment. Keep the following guidelines in mind.

- Always select a tree with good form, i.e., branches are evenly spaced and well attached to the trunk.
- Do not buy trees with damaged trunks or branches.
- Inspect the foliage for insect or disease damage.
- If a tree doesn't look healthy, it probably isn't!
- When buying a balled and burlapped tree, look for the *root flare*, which is the point where the trunk attaches to the roots. It should be visible, not buried 4 inches down.
- Avoid trees with loose burlap and broken root balls.
- When buying container-grown trees, the basal trunk flare should also be visible.
- Do not buy trees where the soil has shrunk away from the sides of the container, lots of roots are protruding from the drainage holes or there are more roots than soil.

Small Trees for the Kansas City Area

The following small trees, with the proper placement and good care, should do well in the Kansas City area.

Name	Height	Spread	Sun	Comments
8 – 15 feet				
<i>Acer palmatum</i> Japanese Maple	8 - 15 ft	5 - 15 ft	Morning sun to partial shade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Protect from hot summer winds • Good accent plant — many cultivars available • Foliage color ranges from variegated green and white to bright purple-red or deep burgundy • <i>Acer palmatum dissectum</i> is a smaller, cut-leaf weeping form
Name	Height	Spread	Sun	Comments
10 – 20 feet				
<i>Morus alba</i> Weeping Mulberry	8 - 10 ft	8 - 10 ft	Full sun	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tolerant of dry, alkaline soils • Drooping branches • Fruitless
<i>Cotinus coggygria</i> or <i>C. obovatus</i> Smoketree	10- 20 ft	10-20 ft	Full sun	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adapts to wide range of soils and pH • Depending on variety, striking purple leaves or blue-green summer foliage • Feathery pink plumes in mid-summer • Impressive fall color
<i>Magnolia grandiflora</i> 'Bracken's Brown Beauty'	10- 20 ft	6- 12 ft	Partial shade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Protect from winter winds • Fragrant, creamy-white flowers • Shiny, dark green foliage with rusty dark brown undersides • Evergreen
12 – 15 feet				
<i>Chionanthus virginicus</i> Fringetree	12- 15 ft	10-15 ft	Full sun to partial shade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Likes moist soil • Covered with white, fragrant fringe-like flowers in May or June • Shiny, dark green summer foliage

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<i>Magnolia grandiflora</i> 'Bracken's Brown Beauty'	10- 20 ft	6- 12 ft	Partial shade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Protect from winter winds Fragrant, creamy-white flowers Shiny, dark green foliage with rusty dark brown undersides Evergreen
12 – 15 feet				
<i>Cornus florida</i> Flowering Dogwood	12-15 ft	10- 5 ft	Morning sun, afternoon shade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Requires very well-drained soil Great spring flowers Fall color ranges from pink to burgundy Bright red fruit Cultivars: 'Cherokee Chief', 'Cherokee Princess', 'Prairie Pink'
<i>Cornus kousa</i> Kousa Dogwood	12-15 ft	10-15 ft	Morning sun, afternoon shade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Requires acidic, well-drained soil Needs protection from summer winds Blooms in June for up to six weeks Good fall color Exfoliating bark as tree ages Raspberry-shaped fruit Cultivars: 'Milky Way', 'Miss Satomi'
<i>Cornus mas</i> Corneliancherry Dogwood	12-15 ft	10-15 ft	Full sun to light shade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Yellow flowers by late February or early March Bright red, cherry-like fruits Exfoliating bark Easy to grow
15 to 20 feet				
<i>Acer buergerianum</i> Trident Maple	15-20 ft	15 - 20 ft	Full sun	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Drought tolerant Great patio tree Dark glossy foliage changes to yellow, orange, red in fall

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<i>Acer ginnala</i> Amur Maple	15-20 ft	15-20 ft	Full sun or light shade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dark green foliage with brilliant fall color • Red seed pods • Great for patios, courtyards and containers • Cultivars: 'Flame', 'Compactum', 'Embers'
<i>Acer griseum</i> Paperbark Maple	15- 20 ft	10 - 15 ft	Morning sun, afternoon shade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peeling cinnamon bark • Dark blue-green leaves divided into three leaflets • Slow growth rate • Site carefully — requires protection from heat, wind and drought
<i>Magnolia stellata</i> Star Magnolia	15- 20 ft	10 - 15 ft	Full sun	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • White star-like early spring flowers • Will need to be limbed up for use as small tree • Little Girl hybrids with pink flowers and later spring bloom available
<i>Magnolia virginiana</i> Sweetbay Magnolia	15- 20 ft	15 - 20 ft	Full sun	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creamy-white fragrant blooms in early summer • Shiny dark green leaves with silver underside • Red 2-inch fruit produces scarlet seed
<i>Prunus serrulata</i> Kwanzan Cherry	15- 20 ft	15 - 20 ft	Full sun	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Completely covered in spring with large double, rosy-pink flowers • Weeping forms (8 - 10 feet tall) available
15 to 25 feet				
<i>Magnolia x loebneri</i> Loebner Magnolia	15- 25 ft	20 - 30 ft	Full sun	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very vigorous hybrid • Produces abundant, fragrant white late-spring flowers
<i>Malus</i> Crabapple	15- 25 ft	10 - 25 ft	Full sun	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plant only disease-resistant varieties • Wide range of size, shape and color • Cultivars: 'Prairie Fire', 'Donald Wyman', 'Sugar Thyme', 'Golden Raindrops', 'Spring Snow', 'Purple Prince', 'Sargent'

Name	Height	Spread	Sun	Comments
20 – 30 feet				
<i>Amelanchier x grandiflora</i> Serviceberry	20- 30 ft	10 15 ft	Full sun	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clusters of white spring flowers • Small green berry-like fruits that ripen to bright red then bluish-purple • Attracts birds • Great fall color of golds, oranges and reds • 2001 Pride of Kansas selection • Cultivar: 'Autumn Brilliance'
<i>Cercis canadensis</i> Redbud	20- 30 ft	20- 30 ft	Full sun to partial shade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Will not tolerate wet soils • Pink-purple spring flowers • Heart-shaped summer leaves • Seed pods that can persist through winter • Natural umbrella-shaped crown • White flowering varieties available
<i>Parrotia persica</i> Parrotia	20- 30 ft	15- 20 ft	Full sun — will tolerate light shade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drought, heat, wind and cold tolerant once established • Excellent small specimen tree • Foliage unfolds reddish purple, turns dark green in the summer • Beautiful orange to scarlet fall color
Name	Height	Spread	Sun	Comments
<i>Prunus virginiana</i> Chokecherry	20-30 ft	15- 20 ft	Full sun	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • White flowers • Edible red fruit good for wildlife • Foliage starts green then changes to reddish purple by early summer • Exfoliating bark and great crooked branches • Can sucker • Cultivar: 'Canada Red'
<i>Styrax japonica</i> Japanese Snowbell	20-30 ft	20- 30 ft	Full sun or partial shade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delicate foliage, profuse white or pink bell-shaped spring flowers • Bark shows irregular, orangish-brown fissures • Horizontal branching pattern

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<i>Syringa reticulata</i> Japanese Tree Lilac	20- 25 ft	15-20 ft	Full sun	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dark green foliage • Large panicles of fragrant white flowers in June • Resistant to powdery mildew and borers • Cultivar: 'Ivory Silk'
Over 25 feet				
<i>Acer truncatum</i> Shantung maple	25- 35 ft	20- 30 ft	Full sun to partial shade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dark green leaves, changing to yellow-orange-red in fall • 2003 Pride of Kansas selection
<i>Koelreuteria paniculata</i> Goldenraintree	25- 30 ft	20- 30 ft	Full sun	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drought, heat and wind tolerant • Tolerates alkaline soils and air pollution • Bright yellow flower clusters in summer followed by papery brown pods in fall • Great for patio area or as specimen
<i>Ostrya virginiana</i> Hophornbeam or Ironwood	25- 30 ft	15- 20 ft	Full sun to partial shade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dark brown bark • Saw-toothed dark green leaves • Yellow fall color • Horizontal or drooping branches • Has a nice rounded canopy

Sources

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(913) 715-7050

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