

Good Fit: Small Trees for Today's Smaller Northwest Gardens

Keith Warren

Urban and suburban gardens have been shrinking for years as new lots become smaller and houses grow larger. This is especially so in the Pacific Northwest, where choice buildable land is squeezed between the mountains and the sea, and the population increase has been steady.

Every garden needs trees. They are the bones of the landscape, providing structure and aerial topography as well as a reference that defines the space. They provide practical infrastructure services, softening winds, cooling the summer sun, reducing rainfall erosion, quieting noise, filtering dust from the air, and producing oxygen. They create the essential habitat for wildlife to survive in our cities.

Large trees are wonderful additions to any garden and should be used when space will allow. My garden has many, as it is large. But small lots mean small gardens, and wise selection can bring trees to any sized landscape area.

For practical landscape planning, I have divided my choice of small trees for the Northwest into four groups based on use. I do not include the extreme dwarfs that are more shrub-like in the landscape. The following are small trees that make true tree-like statements.

Small trees you can walk or garden under: these are upright branching and usually taller than wide. Their greatest width is at or above the midpoint, and the most practical are narrowest at the base and flare outward at the top. It may take some pruning to develop this shape by removing lower branches. These are the most important, being so practical and providing the benefits of a larger tree with a smaller footprint.

Acer circinatum- our native, delicate and choice, especially in partial shade.

Acer griseum- outstanding ornamental bark and fall color. Fireburst is the best cultivar.

Acer palmatum- the aristocrat. Bloodgood, Koto No Ito, Osakazuki, and Seiryu are favorites.

Amelanchier laevis- early spring bloom. Spring Flurry and Snowcloud are very nice.

Cercis canadensis- the species is broad, but Northern Herald is tighter and more upright.

Cornus kousa- the species with pruning, improved Milky Way Select or variegated Summer Fun.

Cornus mas- the species is very broad, but Saffron Sentinel is upright and narrow.

Hamamelis ×intermedia- Arnold Promise, Jelena, Feuerzauber (Fire Charm): yellow, orange, red.

Lagerstroemia hybrids- Natchez is my favorite for the PNW, incredible bark and great fall color.

Malus- Ruby Dayze for disease free foliage, bright magenta-pink flowers, and tiny red fall fruit.

Parrotia persica- the species is broad, but Vanessa has a narrow base and a flaring top.

Pinus contorta var. *contorta*- our native shore pine; prune up and enjoy the trunks.

Prunus sargentii- a large tree, but Pink Flair is smaller, narrow below, flaring on top.

Styrax japonicus- stick to the best cultivars. Snowcone and Snow Charm are more upright.

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Small rounded to spreading trees: A great many small trees could be listed here and many are beautiful spring flowering ornamentals. Most of our cherries, plums, flowering crabapples, hawthorns, and dogwoods fit here. Beautiful, but their width near the ground takes up usable space in the garden, so I only include a few of the best. Good when you want to fill an area.

Cercis canadensis- most become wider than tall. Appalachian Red and Pink Pom Poms best.

Cornus controversa- June Snow is choice, a year around show. A little big, but worth it.

Cornus kousa- the pinks are smaller, more rounded forms: Satomi and very bright Scarlet Fire.

Cornus ×rutgerensis- Celestial for long lasting, ivory-white bloom.

Magnolia hybrids- many to choose from. Spring Welcome is a new favorite, pure white.

Tall skinny trees: Tall trees can be functionally small in the garden if they are extremely narrow. Columnar, narrow oval, and narrow pyramidal forms fit here. They form screens along a property boundary using only a small footprint. They can be used singly as exclamation points in the garden.

Acer rubrum- the species is a large tree, but Armstrong Gold is quite narrow

Fagus sylvatica- a monster as species, but Purple Fountain ascends narrowly and weeps above.

Malus- most are round and scabby, but Ivory Spear and Raspberry Spear are clean and narrow.

Picea glauca- only Pendula: narrowly ascends like a rocket, short branches hanging downward.

Picea omorika- Pendula Bruns is extremely narrow, like a twisting column.

Quercus hybrid- Skinny Genes is dark green, quite tall, but very narrow and tight.

Thuja occidentalis- Emerald (Smaragd) is tightly pyramidal, common hedge, use it differently.

Small focal points, landscape highlights: Small trees of various and often unique shapes with unusual features to use as a point of special interest. These often draw attention via form or color. They are the little gourmet treats of the landscape.

Cercis canadensis- Lavender Twist and Ruby Falls: weeping redbuds, in green or purple foliage.

Chamaecyparis obtusa- Verdoni is a compact conifer with dense sprays of bright yellow

Malus- Summer Sprite: best dwarf flowering crabapple, clean foliage, spring bloom, fall fruit.

Picea orientalis- Firefly is dwarf, perfectly pyramidal with bright yellow needles.

Pinus contorta- Chief Joseph for the brightest yellow needles and a natural looking shape.

Styrax japonicus- Delicate weepers: Fragrant Fountain with white flowers; Marley's Pink, pink.

Taxodium distichum- Cascade Falls, deciduous conifer prunes gracefully to any weeping form.

Tsuga mertensiana- Our native mountain hemlock, the perfect small conifer for an alpine look.

For more information, see:

Michael A. Dirr and Keith S. Warren,

The Tree Book: Superior Selections for Landscapes, Streetscapes, and Gardens,

Timber Press, 2019.