

8/1/2024

# Trees for Small Spaces

Andrew Bunting



*Magnolia grandiflora* Teddy Bear at the JC Raulston Arboretum.



*Malus Prairifire*, common name crabapple.



*Acer japonicum* Aconitifolium.

Many smaller trees are as functional as shade trees, street trees and ornamental trees. Here are just some of those options.

### Magnolias

There are several beautiful diminutive magnolias with excellent spring flowering that suit the need of smaller spaces, but deliver visual impact. Often considered the queen of magnolias, the saucer magnolia (*Magnolia x soulangeana*) can get quite large in the landscape. Lilliputian is a selection with an abundance of pink flowers in early spring that delivers that first taste of spring color. Magnolia Genie is a relatively new introduction that's upright and reaches 13-ft. tall. It starts flowering at a young age and has dark purple flowers—it's a standout for those who love rich, deep color in the garden.

The popular *Magnolia x loebneri* Leonard Messel can be grown as a single trunk tree or a multi-stemmed large shrub, offering gardeners options for design. The star-shaped flowers are borne in abundance in early spring, featuring a lovely rose color on the underside and very soft pink above.

There are many large-leaved magnolias that are native to the Eastern United States. Many feature a very large stature in the garden. The Ashe magnolia (*Magnolia*

*macrophylla* subsp. *ashei*) reaches 20-ft. tall at maturity with exceptionally large, tropical-like leaves. Large white flowers with a purple central splotch appear sporadically throughout the canopy in May. The sweetly scented flowers make it perfect to be planted near a walkway or patio. The Southern magnolia (*Magnolia grandiflora*) is ubiquitous throughout the South. It's coveted for its large, shiny, evergreen leaves and many large and fragrant flowers throughout the summer. However, some trees can reach nearly 100-ft. tall.

Kay Parris is a selection that reaches 20-ft. tall with an upright pyramidal habit. I've seen this particular cultivar also effectively espaliered. Teddy Bear is compact in its form with rounded leaves and an attractive brown indumentum (fuzz) on the undersides of the leaves. These are both diminutive versions of the much larger straight species. While they'll get medium sized over time, they're relatively compact as they mature.

## Maples

There are literally hundreds of cultivars of Japanese maples that mature into large shrubs or small trees. With interesting leaf lobes and colors that span green, red, burgundy or deep purple, Japanese maples offer many options for varying design palettes.

*Acer palmatum* Shishigashira is commonly referred to as the lion's head Japanese maple and grows only a few inches per year, making it a great tree for a tight spot in the garden. The curled and dissected leaves give a great textural quality during the summer. In the fall, these upright vase-shaped trees turn to yellows and oranges in the fall landscape. At maturity, over many years, it'll reach 15- to 18- ft. tall. It's hardy to USDA Zones 5 to 8.

Related to the Japanese maples is full moon maple (*Acer japonicum*). *Acer japonicum* Aconitifolium was selected for its broad and deeply cut deciduous leaves. At maturity it'll reach 12-ft. tall with an equal spread. The fall color is unequalled. The leaves turn to a dazzling fire-engine red in the fall. This in combination with the finely cut leaves makes for a stunning autumnal show.

## Redbuds

In recent years, the redbuds have become more and more popular in the garden as small flowering trees. There's been considerable breeding and selection work done with the native Eastern redbud (*Cercis canadensis*) resulting in many unique options. Appalachian Red has hot pink flowers in the early spring that literally cover the branches before the leaves emerge. Tennessee Pink has soft pink flowers. Merlot has purple leaves with lavender flowers and Flame Thrower has newly emerging foliage that's yellow, orange, red and pink. This color display is truly unique in the garden. The Eastern redbuds are hardy throughout most regions of the U. S. from USDA Zones 4 to 9. This native redbud is host to the larvae of many species of native butterflies and is an important source of food for the leafcutter bees.

The Chinese redbud (*Cercis chinensis*) Don Egolf has an amazing floral display. Don Egolf has very stout branches and at maturity only reaches about 12-ft. tall. In the spring, every branch, regardless of the thickness, is covered in intensely vibrant magenta flowers. It's truly one of the most stunning trees in the spring landscape.

## Other Intriguing Options

An old-fashioned large shrub or small flowering tree that's often overlooked is the smokebush, *Cotinus coggygria*. In early summer, it'll be covered in large fluffy plumes of billowing smoke-like flowers. Depending on the type, the flowers can be either soft pink or a yellowish white. There are also selections for colored leaves, including Velvet Cloak with dark purple leaves and Golden Spirit with bright yellow leaves.

The crabapples are hardy, small flowering trees that come in many flower colors. Prairifire has exhibited excellent resistance to the pest and disease issues that can plague crabapple. At maturity, it'll be a small tree with a round canopy. In the spring, the leaves emerge purple and then fade to green. As the foliage is emerging, it comes into flower with a profusion of deep pink flowers, which contrast beautifully against the foliage.

*Amelanchier x grandiflora* Autumn Brilliance is a hybrid selection of the native serviceberries. Reaching 20-ft. tall, it can be grown as a single-trunked or multi-stemmed tree. It's truly a four-season tree. Before the foliage emerges in the spring, it has a profusion of bright white flowers. In late spring to early summer, the small purple-violet fruits emerge, a great food source for native songbirds and human delicacy. The fall color is orange to red, and in the

winter as the stems mature, they become an attractive smooth silver gray. Autumn Brilliance is a recipient of the 2025 Gold Medal from the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society.

Another great native for winter interest is a diminutive selection of the river birch, *Betula nigra* Fox Valley. Over time, the multiple stems will develop incredibly attractive peeling pink, beige and brown bark. As the common name would suggest, the river birches are very adaptable to growing in wet or poorly drained soils.

Small trees can play an important and stunning role in the garden. Many have the same attributes as their larger counterparts, but cultivar selections have been made specifically for smaller stature trees where space is a consideration. **GP**

---

*Andrew Bunting is the Vice President of Horticulture for the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society (PHS), which uses horticulture to advance the health and well-being of the Greater Philadelphia region. To learn more about PHS, or to become a member and support greening initiatives in over 250 neighborhoods, visit [PHSonline.org](https://www.phsonline.org).*