

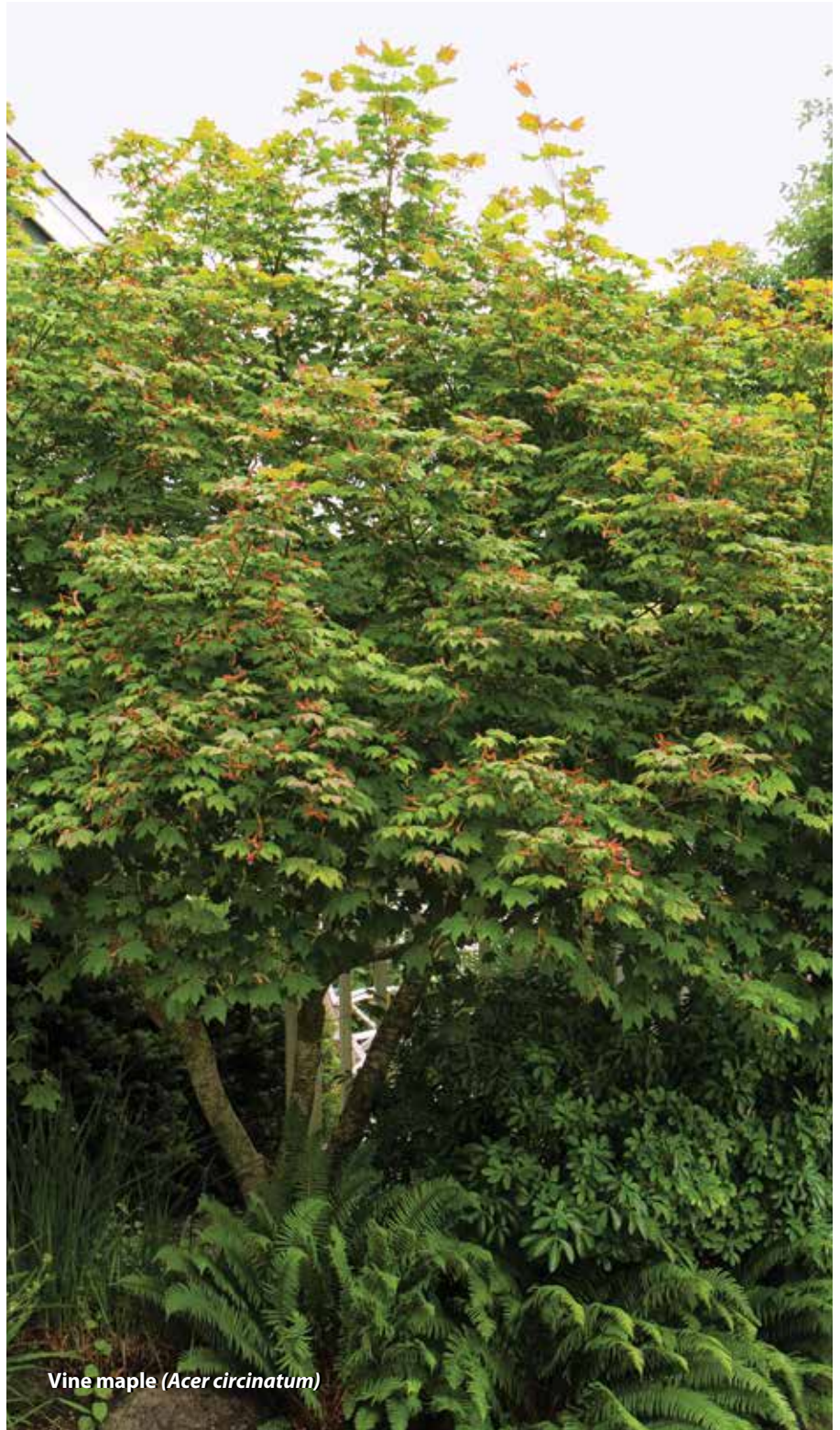
# Small Deciduous Native Trees

Trees are the backbone of the garden. Their size and imposing nature makes them the garden's most important structural element, influencing the placement of just about everything else. In addition, they add aesthetic value, provide shade, and help cool the landscape beneath their canopies. They sequester carbon, help to purify the air, filter water, and provide food, shelter, and habitat for birds and small mammals. Trees also contribute to stress reduction and emotional wellbeing.

Small trees are easier to integrate into the modest-sized gardens most Americans tend. They also offer a wider selection of attributes, e.g., flower color and fragrance, foliage interest and fall color, seedpods or fruits, and interesting bark. They make great focal points, specimens, and privacy screens, and add a vertical element to the garden.

After size, the second most important consideration is whether to select a native or non-native tree. In today's world, where natural habitats are being replaced by housing developments and malls at an alarming rate, filling our yards with native plants is one way to restore some of what is being lost. Andrew Merritt, co-author with Kristin Currin of *The Pacific Northwest Native Plant Primer*, states that by "maximizing the cultivation of diverse native plant landscapes, gardeners are able to have a meaningful impact on habitat and species loss while enjoying an attractive, more economical landscape."

In *Nature's Best Hope: A New Approach to Conservation That Starts in Your Yard*, ecologist and naturalist Doug Tallamy reminds us that "...we no longer have the right to ignore the stewardship responsibilities attached to land ownership." By choosing to install native plants, gardeners are making a commitment to responsible stewardship of their landscape. We can begin to re-establish natural continuity one yard at a time. And what better place to start than with native trees. Native trees are



Vine maple (*Acer circinatum*)

Boost the beauty and ecological potential of your garden by selecting regionally appropriate natives.

BY RICHARD DEVINE



Dwarf chestnut oak (*Quercus prinoides*)



Dwarf chestnut oak bears hanging tassels of yellow-green flowers in spring.

better adapted to local conditions, and already have a connection to the land and to wildlife.

I've chosen to profile a couple of small native deciduous trees suited to gardens in each of five regions of the lower 48 states. The trees selected generally have a mature height under 25 feet, so they will work for many urban and suburban gardens. For more options, see the chart on page 30.

## THE NORTHEAST

**Dwarf Chestnut Oak** (*Quercus prinoides*, USDA Hardiness Zones 5a–8b) Dwarf chestnut oak will reach 25 feet high with

an equal spread. It grows on rocky or sandy, acidic soils and dry plains, bluffs, ridges, and woodland edges, from New Hampshire, south to Florida, and west to Iowa and Oklahoma. The bark is thin, with furrows and ridges, and the leaves are elliptic to oval shaped, with rounded, wavy edges. Yellow-gold to green flowers and red-burgundy catkins adorn the tree in early spring.

Research by Tallamy and others has determined that oaks, in general, are significant supporters of wildlife. They provide home, shelter, and food for 2,300 species, more than 10 percent of which are

associated exclusively with oaks. The larval forms of many species of butterflies and moths feed on the foliage, and the acorns are a primary food source for a variety of birds and small mammals.

Dwarf chestnut oak thrives in a sunny to partly sunny location, in a sandy, loamy or mixed clayey soil. It likes good drainage and will tolerate occasional droughts. Site it where its fall colors of brown-copper to golden yellow can be appreciated.

**Pin Cherry** (*Prunus pensylvanica*, Zones 3a–7b) This widely distributed tree is common in dry to moist clearings, open woodlands and woodland edges throughout much of southern Canada, south along the Appalachians into North Carolina and Georgia. It is a small, narrow tree, fast growing to perhaps 30 feet tall and 20 feet wide. Leaves are shiny, lanceolate to oval shaped, with serrated margins. Fragrant white flowers, borne in umbels, appear in May and June. Shiny, bright red fruits form in the fall.

At least 25 species of birds dine on the berries, including American robins, Baltimore orioles, blue Jays, and downy woodpeckers. It is also the larval host for many moths and butterflies.

The fiery red fall foliage, exfoliating, reddish-brown bark, fragrant white flowers, and red berries make this tree a wonderful asset to the garden.

Pin cherry will thrive in any moist, well-drained, circumneutral (with a pH between 6 and 8) soil in full sun.

## SOUTHEAST

**Parsley Hawthorn** (*Crataegus marshalii*, Zones 7–9) This attractive native tree has finely dissected, delicate leaves on thorny branches that zig-zag gracefully from a single or multiple trunks. It reaches 25 feet high and 15 feet wide, with a spreading, irregular crown. In spring it bears myriad dainty white, five-petaled flowers. Burgundy-red fruits form in the fall.

Parsley hawthorn is common on the eastern Piedmont and coastal plain, in moist to dry sites, on calcareous (limy) uplands and river bottoms, low swamp margins and higher mountain ridges, from Missouri and Illinois south to Texas and Florida. In gardens, parsley hawthorn grows best in full sun and moist, free-draining soils. It will tolerate intermittent dry conditions, once established.

The tree provides shelter and nesting sites for birds, many of which feast on the fruits. Bees, butterflies, and moths are attracted to the flowers and foliage.

**Rusty Blackhaw** (*Viburnum rufidulum*, Zones 5–9) This tree is native to open or rocky, dry woodlands, moist to well-drained uplands, and along streams, from Virginia west to southern Illinois and Missouri and south to Texas and the Gulf Coast. It can attain a height of 18 feet with an equal spread. The branches arch gracefully outward, with an open, spreading crown. The finely serrated, glossy green, oval-shaped leaves turn reddish in fall. The white flowers bloom in showy, five-inch-wide, flattened cymes, in March or April. Numerous bluish-black fruits (technically drupes) ripen in September or October.

Rusty blackhaw provides nectar and abundant pollen to pollinators, especially butterflies and moths, and fruit to numerous birds and small animals.

Plant rusty blackhaw in dry to moist, well-drained, circumneutral, loamy soil. It enjoys full sun to part shade and is drought tolerant, but can also withstand occasional wet conditions.



Rusty blackhaw (*Viburnum rufidulum*)

## MIDWEST

**Ohio Buckeye** (*Aesculus glabra*, Zones 3a–7b) The hardiest of the American buckeyes, this species is widely native throughout the central and upper Midwest, where it favors moist but well-drained sites. They generally top out at 20 to 40 feet tall in cultivation, with an upright, often narrow, habit.

The main show for gardeners starts in early spring with the colorful new foliage, followed by fragrant clusters of greenish to cream-colored flowers sometime between April and June. The palmately compound leaves can turn a colorful yellow to rusty orange in late summer to fall, although some trees

drop their foliage early, especially if they encounter long periods of hot, dry weather. Clusters of prickly nuts form in late summer. These are toxic to people and livestock, but squirrels eat them. Hummingbirds and other pollinators visit the flowers.

Plant Ohio buckeye in a site that is moist but free draining. Mulch around them and irrigate regularly until they are established. They will benefit from the dappled shade provided by a high canopy or other protection from hot afternoon sun in summer.

**Prairie Crabapple** (*Malus ioensis*, Zones 4–8) Prairie crabapple is a small tree



Ohio buckeye (*Aesculus glabra*)

that can grow to about 35 feet tall, with a dense, open crown, and irregular, spreading form, with branches that arch out near to the ground. The bark sheds with age, revealing an attractive silvery gray inner layer. Clusters of large white to pink flowers appear in April or May, along with bright green foliage. Yellow-green fruit develops in the fall. The twigs are usually covered with woolly hairs. Fall foliage is crimson.

Prairie crabapple is native to the eastern prairie region of the upper Mississippi Valley, where it provides nesting, shelter, and food for a wide array of birds. Butterflies, bees, and many other pollinators visit the flowers.

Plant this tree in full sun, in well-drained, rich loamy, circumneutral soil. It will tolerate dry conditions once established, but does best in evenly moist soils.

#### NORTHWEST

The Northwest is a mix of climate extremes due to the influence of the high coastal mountain ranges on air masses coming in off the Pacific Ocean. The coastal areas tend to be warm and very wet, while the eastern side of the Cascades is much drier and cooler.

**Vine Maple** (*Acer circinatum*, Zones 4a–7b) This small native is common to coastal British Columbia and down

the western side of the Cascades into northern California. It grows in moist woods, along stream banks, and moist woodlands. In shady spots it is often sprawling and multi-trunked, but in the sun, it grows more upright and single-trunked, reaching 10 to 25 feet high and 15 to 20 feet wide. Purple to white flowers appearing in short terminal clusters in the spring give way to red winged fruit in the summer. The showy foliage transforms into brilliant yellows, oranges, and reds in the fall.

The seeds are consumed by birds and mammals. Butterflies are attracted to the flowers.

This is a good tree for the western side of the Cascades, where it will get ample amounts of moisture. Once es-



Ohio buckeye fall foliage and nut

established, however, it will tolerate drier conditions. Plant it in part sun to shade in loamy, sandy, circumneutral soil.

For the drier, east side of the Cascades, plantsman Andrew Merritt recommends Rocky Mountain maple (*Acer glabrum*), which is much more sun- and drought-tolerant.

**Chokecherry** (*Prunus virginiana*, Zones 2–7) Chokecherry is nearly ubiquitous in the northern part of the country, being common across Canada, from Newfoundland to British Columbia, and then south, as far as North Carolina, Tennessee, and Arkansas, and west to Texas and California.

## MORE SMALL NATIVE TREES

Common Name (Botanical Name)	Height/ Width (feet)	Notable Characteristics	Wildlife Value	Native Range	USDA Hardiness Zones
<b>NORTHEAST</b>					
Gray birch ( <i>Betula populifolia</i> )	20–50/ 10–20	Attractive white bark, yellow fall flowers	Songbirds feed on seeds; sapsuckers feed on sap	NJ to VA scattered to northeastern IL	3a–7b
Carolina silverbell ( <i>Halesia carolina</i> )	10–40/ 25–35	Showy flowers, gold/ yellow fall leaf color	Larval host, nectar for pollinators	WV to OH, OK and IL, south to FL	4a–8b
<b>SOUTHEAST</b>					
Georgia oak ( <i>Quercus georgiana</i> )	26–50/ 15–30	Red fall foliage, lawn specimen	Oaks support wide variety of wildlife	NC to northern AL	5a–8b
Blackhaw viburnum ( <i>Viburnum prunifolium</i> )	12–20/ 6–15	Showy flowers, purple berries; red-purple fall foliage	Fruit eaten by wildlife, host for Azure butterfly	Eastern and central North America	3a–9b
<b>MIDWEST</b>					
Smooth serviceberry ( <i>Amelanchier laevis</i> )	15–25/ 10–20	Fragrant white spring flowers; attractive fall foliage	Edible berries for wildlife (and people)	Northeast and central North America	4–8
Showy mountain ash ( <i>Sorbus glabra</i> )	20–30/ 15–20	White late-spring flowers; clusters of bright red berries	Berries eaten by birds and other wildlife	Eastern Canada and ME west to MN, south to NC	2–6
<b>NORTHWEST</b>					
Douglas maple ( <i>Acer glabrum</i> var. <i>douglasii</i> )	12–40/ 20–30	Fall color, red winged seeds	Cover for birds, nectar	Mountains of western US	3a–8b
Oregon crabapple ( <i>Malus fusca</i> )	10–15/ 15–20	Showy flowers, fruit; fall color red to dull yellow	Fruit eaten by birds, small mammals	Southern AK, south to northwestern CA	6–7
<b>SOUTHWEST</b>					
Desert willow ( <i>Chilopsis linearis</i> )	5–30/ 20–30	Flowers, fruit, foliage	Nectar, seeds, larval host	Southwest and western TX, southwestern UT southern NV, southern CA	7a–11b
Blue palo verde ( <i>Parkinsonia florida</i> )	15–30/ 25–30	Lemon-yellow flowers blue-green summer foliage	Seeds, nectar, cover	Central and southern AZ into southeastern CA	9–12

Chokecherry typically grows to 20 or 30 feet, with an irregular rounded to oval crown, and a spread of 15 to 20 feet. In mid spring it produces a profusion of cylindrical inflorescences loaded with scented, five-lobed, white flowers. Red fruits appear in late summer, ripening to dark purple in August and September.

The fruits, leaves, and twigs of this keystone species are browsed by bears, moose, and coyotes. Birds, as well as small mammals, eat the fruit and seeds. Chokecherry provides cover and nesting for many songbirds, and supports many butterflies and moths.

Plant chokecherry in full sun to part shade, in moist, well-drained clay, loam or sandy soil. Soil pH should be circum-neutral. It will tolerate some drought

when established. Remove unwanted suckers as they appear. This tree can be used as a screen or hedge, or naturalized in a woodland setting.

### SOUTHWEST

The American Southwest, like the Northwest, is a mix of very different environments due to the interaction of weather systems coming in off the Pacific Ocean with topographic features of the land, producing extremes of temperature, precipitation, evaporation, and soil types throughout the region.

**Western Redbud** (*Cercis occidentalis*, 6a–9b) Western redbud is an early harbinger of spring, with its delicate pink to magenta flowers opening on bare

branches in April or May. This tree, often multi-stemmed, grows 15 to 20 feet high and nearly as wide, with a rounded crown and branching that often starts low to the ground. Lime-green seedpods develop after the flowers, aging to a purplish brown color by fall. At higher elevations, the leaves may turn yellow, gold, or red.

Western redbud is native to southern Oregon and California, with scattered populations in Utah, and Arizona. In the northern, rainier part of its range, it can be found on dry slopes and mountain foothills. In drier areas, it grows along high elevation creeks, and canyon bottoms, where soil is moist.

Leaf cutter bees are fond of the large, flat leaves. Hummingbirds, bees, butterflies, and moths, are attracted to the



Western redbud (*Cercis occidentalis*)

flowers. It provides shelter and nesting for many songbirds.

Site this tree in full sun. Free-draining soils are best, but it's adaptable to a wide variety of soil types. It can withstand occasional moderate rains. In hotter inland areas, and during the dry season, irrigate well until established, then only when necessary.

**Gambel Oak** (*Quercus gambelii*, Zones 4–8) Gambel oak is native to Colorado, Utah, New Mexico, Wyoming, and Arizona. It grows on dry, high elevation slopes, hills, and canyons, at elevations of 3000 to 8000 feet. This slow-growing tree generally peaks at 20- to 30-foot tall and about half as broad, although it has been known to reach 50 feet tall. The bark

is red-brown to gray, and furrowed, and the branches are crooked. The leaves, deeply lobed with rounded margins, are up to five inches long. Flowers appear in catkins during March through May, followed by three-quarter-inch acorns in fall. The leaves turn yellow to red brown as the weather cools late in the year.

Gambel oak is browsed by deer and squirrels eat the acorns. Small mammals and birds find cover and nesting among its branches.

Plant Gambel oak in full sun to light shade, in free-draining soil. Water regularly until the tree is established, then taper off and allow natural rainfall to provide moisture. Justin Daniel of the California Native Plant Society, while enthusiastic about Gambel oak, especially for drier

## Sources

**Ancient Roots Native Nursery**, Poseyville, IN. [www.ancientrootsnativenursery.com](http://www.ancientrootsnativenursery.com).

**Great Plains Native Nursery**, Weston NE. [www.greatplainsnursery.com](http://www.greatplainsnursery.com).

**Mail Order Natives**, Lee, FL. [www.mailordernatives.com](http://www.mailordernatives.com).

**Nearly Native Nursery**, Fayetteville GA. [www.nearlynativenursery.com](http://www.nearlynativenursery.com).

**Sooner Plant Farm**, Park Hill, OK. [www.soonerplantfarm.com](http://www.soonerplantfarm.com).

## Resources

### Native Trees for North American Landscapes

by Guy Sternberg with Jim Wilson. Timber Press, 2004.

**Nature's Best Hope: A New Approach to Conservation that Starts in Your Yard** by Douglas W. Tallamy. Timber Press, 2020.

**The Northeast Native Plant Primer** by Uli Lorimer and Native Plant Trust, Timber Press, 2022.

**The Midwest Native Plant Primer** by Alan Branham. Timber Press, 2020.

**The Pacific Northwest Native Plant Primer** by Kristin Currin and Andrew Merritt. Timber Press, 2023.

areas of the Southwest, notes that it does have some disease issues. Other fairly low-growing choices for the Southwest include California scrub oak (*Q. berberidifolia*) and wavyleaf oak (*Q. xundulata*).

## GARDEN ANCHORS

Regionally native trees set the stage for design and help anchor the ecological framework of gardens. For something this important, it's worth doing some research before heading to the garden center and picking something in bloom. But don't delay too long. As the saying goes, the best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago, but the second best is right now. ■

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