

## ***Native Trees in Your Landscape***

Thoughts of Garry Plunkett

### BROADLEAF/DECIDUOUS TREES

**Oaks.** Wonderful trees with many environmental connections to Southern New England natural communities. They grow fast - in spite of widespread belief otherwise, with deep taproots making them “hurricane resistant.”

Pin Oak *Quercus palustris*. Popular yard tree with excellent form; few acorns, modest fall color, and widely available in nurseries.

Northern Red Oak *Q. rubra*. Beautiful tree for yard and beneficial for natural habitat; lovely in autumn. Ditto for the scarlet oak *Q. coccinea*.

Eastern White Oak *Q. alba*. See red oak comments, though the white oak generally grows into a rounder shape in open areas. Its acorns are more desirable to wildlife; fall color often chocolate brown. (Similarly leaved English oak, *Q. robur* should be avoided.)

**Maples.** The signature species of Northern Hardwood forests that attract leaf peepers from all over the world.

Red Maple *Acer rubrum*. Most common tree in New England but every yard should have the red brilliance of this tree in October (leaves) and April (flowers).

Sugar Maple *A. saccharum*. Quintessential New England tree; fast growing and spectacular red-orange fall color.

Silver Maple *A. saccharinum*. If you’re in a hurry to get a shade tree, this is for you, but at some risk since its speed-growth makes it susceptible to limb breakage in high winds – that’s why most large ones you see are multi-trunk; rather colorless in the Autumn.

NOTE: Avoid exotic invasive species, Norway maple, *A. platanoides*, and Sycamore maple, *A. pseudoplatanus*.

### **Birches**

Paper Birch *Betula papyrifera*. Another charter member of New England forests, with its characteristic white bark. This “canoe birch” is preferable to, and more disease resistant than other similar birches, e.g. gray birch *B. populifolia* or various European white birches e.g. *B. pendula*.

River Birch *B. nigra*. Multi-stemmed river birches with their lovely peach-colored, exfoliating bark are popular, widely available, and terrific trees for a landscape; fast growing but reasonably storm resistant; less susceptible to pathogens than whites.

Yellow Birch *B. Alleghaniensis*. The lovely gold foil bark is the attraction of this birch, and a tree that thrives in wetter soils. Like all the birches, it has a nice yellow fall color.

**Beeches.** The American beech *Fagus grandifolia* is preferred if one is creating natural habitat, but the European beech *F. sylvatica* is better for one's yard since it doesn't root sprout, and they come in "copper beech" varieties.

**Ashes.** The New England natives (*Fraxinus spp.*) are white, green, and black, with the white being the most common and most desirable. They add a purple-brown color to the autumn scene, and diversity to a woodland. The emerald ash borer is a serious impending threat to ashes in our forests but individual trees in urban woodscapes may help the species survive, similar to what's happened with the American elm.

**Locusts.** Both locusts are originally native to areas further south but both have been widely planted in New England. The honey locust (*Gleditsia triacanthos*) has huge thorns though a thornless variety is now a common yard tree that provides filtered shade and rake-free fall litter. The black locusts (*Robinia pseudoacacia*) has beautiful pendulous white flowers in late May, but it root sprouts aggressively and has an unattractive growth form.

**Hickories.** Hickory trees are splendid trees for yards and woodlands – fast growing, disease resistant, wildlife friendly, and they display a beautiful orange-yellow glow in autumn. Shagbark hickory (*Carya ovata*) is a favorite, with its interesting shaggy bark and telephone pole straight stem. It is also the most available. Bitternut hickory (*C. cordiformis*) and pignut hickory (*C. glabra*) are also worthy. Note that hickories (and oaks) are difficult to dig up and transplant because they put down deep taproots. Get nursery stock or transplant them as seedlings or small saplings

**Tulip Tree** (*Liriodendron tulipifera*). It is hard to find anything not to like with this Appalachian giant. Its growth rate can produce a significant tree in 8-10 years, with a shapely form, and spectacular orange-yellow flowers (albeit hard to see once the tree reaches maturity).

**Sassafras** (*Sassafras albinum*). A worthy addition to a natural setting with several obligate butterfly/moth species and notable fall foliage. It root sprouts aggressively, but that can be controlled.

**Eastern Sycamore** (*Platanus occidentalis*). A good addition for diversity in a woodland but the hybrid London Plane Tree is a better selection for a yard, as it is less susceptible to anthracnose fungus. Grows extremely fast, has interesting mottled bark, but produces lots of "buttonwood" fruit. Drab fall color and leaves compost slowly.

**Sweetgum** (*Liquidambar styracifolia*). An import from southern forests but it has a growing presence in urban landscapes because of its good form and lovely red-orange fall color. Like the sycamore, it produces lots of "gumballs" to be raked up (or made into Christmas ornaments).

## CONIFER/EVERGREEN TREES

**Eastern White Pine** (*Pinus strobus*). A stalwart tree of eastern forests with deep roots (sorry!) in New England history and colonial economy, the white pine grows rapidly and provides year round greenery and big cones for decorative uses. In the open its side branches spread out to form a round “cabbage pine” shape compared to tall, single stem trees found in the forest.

**Pitch Pine** (*P. rigida*). The gnarly pine found on pine barrens of Cape Cod. Its heavy, coarse needles can provide a rugged greenery to a dry corner of a landscape.

**Tamarack** (*Larix laricina*). This relative of European larch is the contrarian of eastern forests – a conifer that sheds its needles and a “softwood” with wood harder than most hardwoods. While it won’t win any beauty contests in winter, it has good three-season interest, with soft delicate blue-green tufts of needles, beautiful crimson female cones, and a pretty tawny color in autumn.

**Eastern Red Cedar** (*Juniperis virginiana*). The “old field cedar” is common everywhere open land has been abandoned, and it has environmental benefits in providing food for hungry spring migrating birds and good, protective nesting in its boughs. The prickly juniper foliage also deters deer browsing.

**Atlantic White Cedar** (*Chamaecyparis thyoides*). Once abundant along the Eastern seaboard in white cedar swamps, its foliage resembles the red cedar (without prickles) and is an excellent conifer for wet sites.

**Northern White Cedar** (*Thuja occidentalis*). Commonly called arbor vitae, this tree has dozens of horticultural varieties. Good for visual buffers and windbreaks but very prone to deer browse damage.

**Balsam Fir** (*Abies balsamea*). This native of high altitudes and northern New England can grow in our region. A favorite Christmas tree, it has a pleasant scent and attractive pyramidal shape.

**Spruce** (*Picea spp.*). The other favorite Christmas tree, spruce trees come in several forms, some of which are not native to New England and do not do well in our climate, e.g. the Colorado blue spruce. The most common native available is the white spruce (*P. glauca*). I prefer the red spruce (*P. rubens*) but it is harder to find and grows slower than the white.

**Hemlock** (*Tsuga canadensis*). Unfortunately, this lovely conifer has been largely eliminated from southern New England by the hemlock wooly adelgid, and should not be planted.

## TREES FOR WOODLAND DIVERSITY

**Black Cherry** (*Prunus serotina*). This native will appear on its own due to bird dispersal, and is of great ecological benefit in eastern forests. It also has notable floral and fall color appeal.

**Quaking Aspen** (*Populus tremuloides*). Identified by its shimmering leaves in the slightest breeze, its bright yellow foliage is a mainstay of autumn all across the northern U.S.

**Eastern Hophornbeam** (*Ostrya virginiana*). An understory specialist with slow growth and a quiet presence, it has interesting bark, seed clusters, and a lovely lacy pattern in its branching habit.

**American Hornbeam** (*Carpinus caroliniana*). Also called musclewood because of its sinewy smooth “muscular” surface, it’s another understory tree that adds mid-layer structure in mature forests.

**Basswood** (*Tilia Americana*). The New World version of a linden tree, fast growing, bee favorite of rich woods.

**Northern Hackberry** (*Celtis occidentalis*). Uncommon but interesting tree known for its signature bark figure; has good yellow fall color and several lepidoptera obligates.

Recommended reading:

*Bringing Nature Home, How You Can Sustain Wildlife with Native Plants*, by Douglas Tallamy  
*Trees of New England, A Natural History*, by Charles Fergus