



## Trees and Shrubs: Lifelong Plants

by Karen Atkins - June 2014

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**"The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago. The next best time is now."**  
– Chinese Proverb

Few nursery purchases can rival the impact of a tree on your landscape. Even small accent trees, sometimes referred to as specimen trees, really pack a punch when it comes to design. So many of us bring home load after load of bulbs, annuals and perennials, but never get around to planting any trees.

It might be worry over making a mistake that leads to procrastination. After all, most of us have limited space in our gardens, and each tree we bring home carries an opportunity lost for another. I have assembled a list of my favorites, hoping you won't be able to resist bringing at least one of them home.

### Trees for Large Spaces

#### Corinthian Littleleaf Linden (*Tilia cordata* ‘Corzam’)

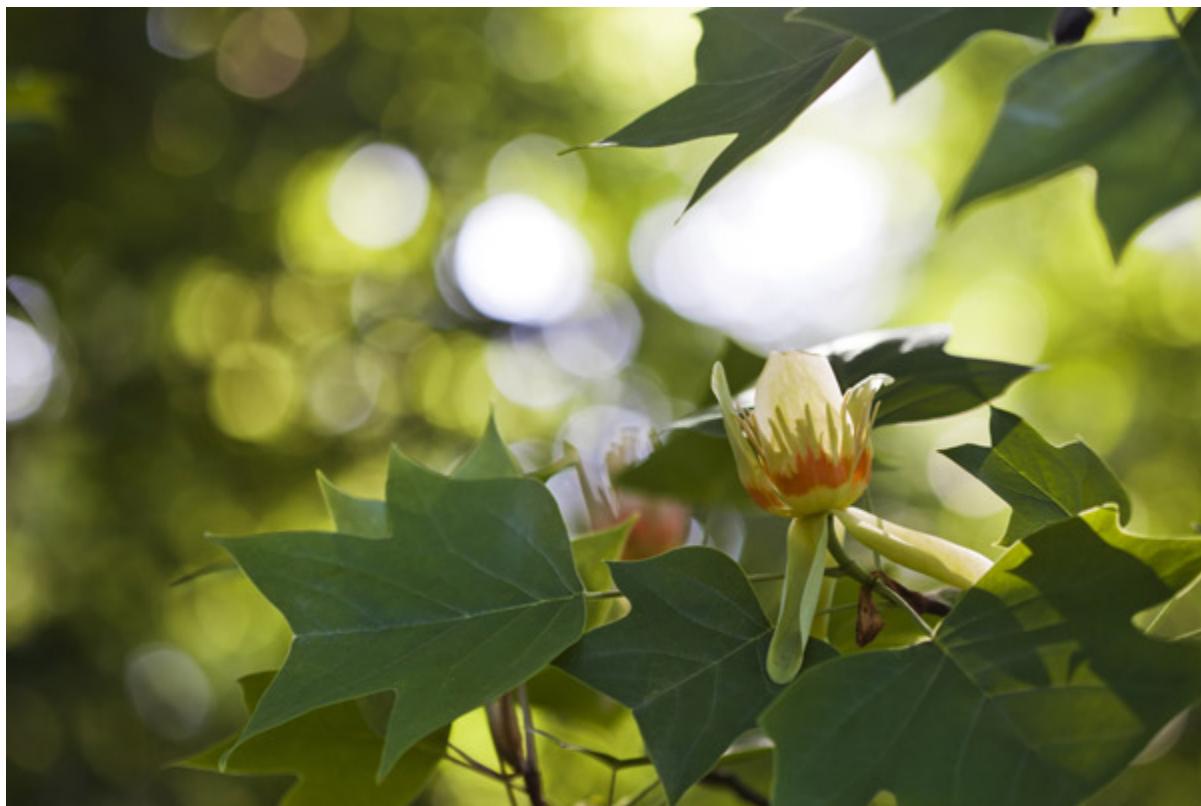
This tree grows into a perfectly conical shape with no pruning. It throws dense shade and grows in a wide range of soil conditions. It is super hardy, handling temperatures to minus 40 F. More importantly for our region, it has flexible wood, making it ideal for open, windy areas. In the spring, it develops small yellow flowers that are extremely fragrant. In the fall, the leaves turn yellow. It is one of the last trees to lose its leaves. This tree looks great alone, or grouped along both sides of a driveway. It grows about 45 feet high with a 15-foot-wide canopy.

### Tulip Tree (*Liriodendron tulipifera*)

This stunning tree grows to 100 feet tall. It has a 40-foot-wide canopy that is dense enough to shelter you from light rain. In early spring, it develops fist-sized, pale yellow flowers with orange centers, which resemble tulips. The leaves, too, have a tulip shape. While sadly it can take up to 15 years to begin flowering, you can skirt this issue by spending a little more to get an older tree at the beginning. If you can't find a larger one, plant it for the next generation. I first saw one at Thomas Jefferson's Monticello, where there are, in fact, two. Jefferson described this beauty in a letter that he sent in a packet of seeds to a Parisian friend as "The Juno of our groves."

### Columnar European Hornbeam (*Carpinus betulus 'Fastigiata'*)

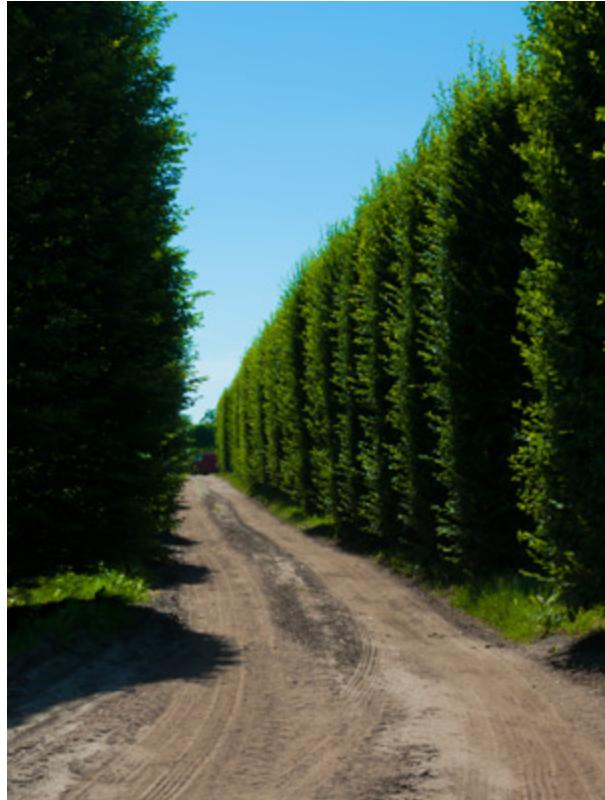
This is the granddaddy of all goodness, when it comes to design with trees. It grows in a perfect column, and can be planted tightly (every 3 feet) for a "hedge on stilts" that will take your breath away – and will only need trimming twice a year. Although it loses its leaves in fall, the hedge will still be an effective screen in winter, given its dense branching habit. It is expensive, I warn you. However, clients of mine who objected to the price of 20 trees one year asked me to order 40 more the next. It is that good, so get out your checkbook.



Thomas Jefferson referred to the native tulip tree as the "Juno of our groves."<sup>1</sup>



Corinthian littleleaf linden grows in a pyramidal shape without pruning. It has fragrant flowers (bracts) in spring and turns a lovely yellow gold in fall.<sup>2</sup>



Columnar European hornbeam makes a striking hedge.<sup>3</sup>

## Trees for Small Spaces

### Lollipop Dwarf Crabapple (*Malus ‘Lollizam’*)

I love this little beauty. It grows about 5 feet tall, where it branches out into a perfect ball. It flowers white in the spring and develops great-big red berries in the fall. I love the little sphere in the landscape. A new introduction that I am dying to try is Cinderella dwarf crabapple (*Malus ‘Cinzam’*). It develops a larger, oval shape and bright yellow fruit in the fall. I have a feeling I have to have both.



Lollipop crabapples grow naturally into a topiary shape.<sup>2</sup>



Lollipop crabapples sport lovely, bright fruit in the fall.<sup>2</sup>



Cinderella dwarf crabapple grows in an oval shape.<sup>2</sup>



Cinderella dwarf crabapple boasts cheery golden fruit.<sup>2</sup>

### Columnar Apple Tree (*Malus* cvs.)

These fun little cuties grow 10 feet tall and don't develop horizontal branches. This is an instant green screen, wherever you need one. They are inexpensive, widely available in all kinds of varieties and come with easy to manage root balls. And, they produce apples. What more could you ask of a tree? Growers recommend planting these 2 feet apart for a screen but at about \$20 each, I like them planted every foot.

## Pretend Trees



Hydrangeas and several other types of shrubs can be grown as a standard. Regular spring pruning gives this 'Kyushu' hydrangea (*H. paniculata* 'Kyushu') its tree form.<sup>3</sup>

In a very small space, try shrubs trained to masquerade as trees. Roses (*Rosa* cvs.), lilacs (*Syringa* cvs.) and hydrangeas (*Hydrangea* cvs.) are all available already trained into standards that mimic small, flowering trees.

Well you know I couldn't plant my list of favorites without also warning you off of some bad ones. I can tell you that catalpa trees (*C. bignonioides*) take up too much room for too little bloom time and lots of dirty shedding all season long. And if you think you need to have an arborvitae (*Thuja occidentalis*), which actually isn't a tree, but a shrub that looks like a tree, make it 'Techny'. This is the only pretty one available, in my opinion, and consequently not always easy to find. Big box stores don't know about it, so you need to go to a real nursery.

Next – an unpopular word on Japanese maples (*Acer palmatum*). Every client I've ever had thinks they have to have one. But these are very difficult to place. You know the way houses decorated in the Santa Fe style usually work best in Santa Fe? Similarly, these trees usually look best in Asian-themed gardens. They can jar you right out of the mood in a traditional garden. I just stayed in a lovely bed and breakfast in Saugatuck, Mich., with a Colonial garden, including espaliered apples, hedges and brick pathways. It was all in complete harmony except for that one offending Japanese maple. All I could think when I saw it was, "Honey, are you lost? Now I do realize, in this age of accessibility, it is the fashion for garden writers to say that you should have anything you want. After all, it is your own garden. Well, it is America, so it isn't like you'll get arrested. But if I inherited a brightly flaming Japanese maple tree in an otherwise pretty standard, traditional garden, the first thing I would do is touch a match to it.

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2. Photo courtesy Maria Zampini/Upshoot LLC
3. Photo courtesy of Karen Atkins



For small spaces, shrubs, such as roses, hydrangeas, lilacs, cotoneaster (*Cotoneaster* cvs.) and juniper (*Juniperus* cvs.) grown as a tree, called a standard, work well.<sup>3</sup>

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Karen Atkins loves to hear from and help gardeners throughout the Midwest; email her at [propergardensgrandrapids@gmail.com](mailto:propergardensgrandrapids@gmail.com). Hire her for your next speaking engagement or visit her website for more ideas: [propergardens.com](http://propergardens.com)