

Small Ornamental Trees for Nebraska Landscapes

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Small ornamental trees have their place in landscapes. While we need tall shade trees to provide shade and cooling, smaller trees fulfill many landscape functions.

They provide some shade and are good for wind protection, framing or blocking views, and giving privacy. For landscape design, they're used to create outdoor rooms by providing the effects of low ceilings or walls.

The spring blooms, fruits, and fall color of ornamental trees are used as seasonal focal points. Flowers and fruits provide food for songbirds and pollinators and branches and leaves are wildlife shelter.

Following are suggestions for smaller trees for Nebraska. These are hardy trees under 30 feet tall that are aesthetically pleasing for more than one season. Be careful of selecting trees with one good characteristic, like leaf color, but have nuisance characteristic like root suckering such as Canada red or Schubert chokecherry and Quaking aspen.

A small ornamental tree we need more of is Serviceberry (*Amelanchier* sp). Trees range from 15 to 25 feet tall and are native or regionally native depending on the species. They have white April blooms, making them a replacement for overplanted ornamental pear. Edible fruit produced in June attracts songbirds who devour all the fruit. Most have orangish fall color like the cultivar "Autumn Brilliance".

Hardy northern sources of Eastern redbud (*Cercis canadensis*) are good to plant. With purplish pink blooms in April, they stand out each spring. They are native and prefer part shade, especially afternoon shade in hot Nebraska. 'Alba' and 'Royal White' are white booming cultivars.

Ironwood or American Hophornbeam (*Ostrya virginiana*) is a tough, durable tree. It tolerates alkaline soil and dry sites. Another native, it typically grows 25 to 30 feet tall and has interesting fruit and bark. The bark is flaky and the fruit, resembling clusters of hops, appear in July or August.

Hawthorns are also tough trees but many have thorns. Thornless cockspur Hawthorn (*Crataegus cuspalli* var. *inermis*) is a good choice. These 15 to 25 foot tall tree has glossy green leaves, white spring flowers, and persisting red fruit. When fruit persists into winter, they add winter interest and provide food for wildlife. Hawthorns tolerates alkaline soils and dry or wet sites.

Japanese tree lilac (*Syringa reticulata*) is a tree form of lilac growing up to 20 to 30 feet. They bloom in June with white, fragrant flowers and are proving to be tolerant of clay soils and urban conditions. Peking tree lilac is a subspecies. The cultivar 'Copper Curls' has exfoliating coppery bark and trees are growing in the Blair NE arboretum and at the North Platte research station.

Corneliancherry dogwood (*Cornus mas*) is hardier than flowering dogwood (*Cornus florida*) and has yellow flowers in April. It grows to 15 to 25 feet and has sour but edible fruit for use in jams and jellies. Kousa dogwood (*Cornus kousa*) has interesting white flowers in May and red fall color. It needs uniform moisture or leaves can scorch causing the edges to turn brown.

Fringetree (*Chionanthus virginicus*) ranges in height from 12 to 20 feet. It has very interesting white flowers that resemble fringes and bloom in May. They are fragrant and followed by bluish fruit to attract songbirds. With yellow fall color and good adaptability to urban sites, it's worth trying.

A smaller maple to use is Shantung maple (*Acer truncatum*). The leaves resemble Japanese maple leaves, but this maple is hardier. It has orangish yellow fall color and reaches 20 to 25 feet tall. It is listed as having good drought and heat tolerance once established.