

Larger Trees for Northwest Landscapes, Neighborhoods, Streets, and Environmental Benefits

Keith Warren

Northwest Flower & Garden Festival - 2020

Large trees are the bones of the landscape. They frame the residence, they create the environment that is the neighborhood, and can turn bare lanes of concrete into lush avenues of green. Chosen carefully, larger trees can fit into smaller landscapes and street trees can merge with and enhance the residential garden. Larger trees in landscapes can contribute significantly to the urban forest and the city's environment.

When space allows, large trees create an urban oasis. Wildlife is attracted and cheerful birds will be outside your windows. Some of the choicest neighborhoods are defined and unified by their urban forest canopy, adding immensely to property values, aesthetics, and enjoyment.

Street trees cool the city in summer and soften winds in winter. They absorb rainfall and reduce runoff, thus decreasing the need for expensive enlargement of storm water pipes. Shading pavement in summer prolongs its life. Rainfall interception and filter-like roots help keep our streams clean for fish. Trees on the south and west side of homes significantly reduce energy consumption by summer shading. Recent studies have proven that living among trees in a green environment improves health. Moods are lifted and stress levels are reduced by a walk through a well vegetated area. Even surgery recoveries have been shown to be shortened by a green view out a hospital window. You don't always have to drive to the National Forest to find relaxation among the trees; bring the forest to you by planting your garden, street, and neighborhood.

Some of the best large trees for the Pacific Northwest follow.

Evergreen trees. Beautiful in their year around greenery. Our native forest is largely evergreen conifer dominated, showing that they are well adapted to our climate. I emphatically emphasize native evergreen conifers for natural areas, both wild and urban. But on the west side of the Cascades, winter can be dark and a bit dismal, so I emphasize deciduous trees near residences, especially on the south side. Our worst weather happens in the winter, so consider the effect of an evergreen's winter foliage on wind and snow load when choosing.

Cedrus deodara- Large, elegant, and graceful, it fits in well with our native hemlock and Douglas fir. Heat and drought resistant, so if a warmer climate is coming, it's ready.

Pinus flexilis- Vanderwolf's Pyramid is one of the most climate adaptable of conifers, doing well on both the west and east side of the Cascades. Glaucous blue needles are attractive.

Pseudotsuga menziesii- our native Douglas fir is the mainstay of our forest. Preserve the native stands and plant it for restoration on well drained soils, but avoid compacted or saturated ground.

Deciduous trees. Let there be light! Deciduous trees are so compatible with our urban human domain in the Northwest, especially on the west side of the mountains. They provide shade and cooling in the summer when needed, and let the sun in when our season turns cloudy and dark. Their bare branches catch less wind and snow load, so they may be more tolerant of winter storms. Spring flowers and autumn fall color are possible bonuses.

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Acer rubrum- Redpointe is the best of the traditionally shaped, upright oval varieties, with great fall color and Armstrong Gold is the tightest form of the columnar, perfect for downtown streets.

Acer truncatum hybrid- Urban Sunset is upright pyramidal in form and lighter in seed production than related hybrids. It's narrower, tighter in form, and features red fall color.

Fagus sylvatica- Asplenifolia is my favorite cultivar of this potentially massive species, smaller in mature size with delicate narrow foliage and refined branching.

Ginkgo biloba- slow growing at first, but long lived and worth the wait. The brightest gold foliage in the fall landscape. Presidential Gold is the best branched form of the species.

Gymnocladus dioica- the Kentucky coffeetree has tropical-like large compound leaves.

Seedpods can detract, but Espresso is seedless, as good on the streets as a pour is in a cup.

Liriodendron tulipifera- it gets big, so be sure you have room and be aware of possible aphid drip. Emerald City is somewhat compact with refined branching and deep green glossy foliage.

Metasequoia glyptostroboides- It's big, it's bold, it's a conifer, but deciduous. Muscular trunk is reminiscent of cedar and needles like redwood. Seedlings are fine; Jade Prince the best variety.

Nyssa sylvatica- tupelo excels in wet soil and shows the brightest of fall colors, but seedling branches often droop. Look to these varieties for better upright form: Firestarter and Afterburner.

Ostrya virginiana- hophornbeam is not common, but delivers urban forest diversity to city streets. Autumn Treasure features refined branching on a pyramidal frame and yellow fall color.

Platanus ×acerfolia- give it lots of room; it's broad spreading with a robust trunk. Bloodgood has stood the test of time, but Exclamation! is new and seems an improvement.

Pseudolarix amabilis- amabilis translates to "lovely" and this tree is well named. A deciduous conifer with soft needle sprays and golden fall foliage. Lovely, I agree.

Quercus bicolor- picked as the primary species for the 9/11 memorial, it's strong and long lived. Very soil adaptable. American Dream features improved form and disease resistant foliage.

Quercus phellos- willow oak has narrow willow-like leaves that might make it hard to recognize as an oak. They give it a finer texture and allow filtered light. Red fall color common.

Quercus hybrids- many fine cultivars exist from English oak crossed with American species. Heritage is an upright broad oval and Streetspire a narrower oval. Both clean, dark green foliage.

Quercus rubra- red oak is so common, but there is good reason. Big, bold, strong, long lived with large leaves that turn rusty to bright red in the fall. Give it room.

Quercus velutina- black oak is little known in the West, but similar to red oak in appearance. Better adapted to drought and higher pH, we should try it on the east side and see adaptability.

Ulmus davidiana hybrids- lots of cultivars, resistant to Dutch elm disease. Of these, I favor Accolade for moderate size, graceful vase shape, strength, and deep glossy green foliage.

Zelkova serrata- well known, often used on streets. Green Vase is most common, but needs pruning for branch spacing. Wireless is flat topped; choose for utility clearance, red fall color.

For more information, see:

Michael A. Dirr and Keith S. Warren,

The Tree Book: Superior Selections for Landscapes, Streetscapes, and Gardens,
Timber Press, 2019