

# Ten Great Understory Trees For the Pacific Northwest

Presented by  
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**At the 2020 Northwest Flower & Garden Festival**

*Sources:* Personal experience, Great Plant Picks ([greatplantpicks.com](http://greatplantpicks.com)), and *The Tree Book* by Michael A Dirr and Keith S. Warren.



## **Acer Griseum (Paperbark Maple)**

An outstanding understory tree providing year-round interest with its fabulous peeling coppery bark and brilliant autumn color.

**Native range:** Central China

**Zones:** 5-8

**Size:** 18' in 10 years; 30' at maturity.

**Light requirements:** full sun or light to deep shade.

**Heat/drought:** heat and drought tolerant once established, but appreciates occasional water during very long dry spells.

**Soil:** tolerates a wide range of soils. Avoid locations where water puddles and does not drain away.

**Pruning:** requires only removal of weak branches, dead/diseased wood, and broken limbs.

## **Azara microphylla 'Variegata'** **(Variegated Boxleaf Azara)**

A lovely tall and narrow evergreen, this tree has small variegated leaves and fragrant winter flowers.

**Native range:** Chile and Argentina

**Zones:** 7-9

**Size:** 10-20', sometimes more.

**Light requirements:** full sun or light to dappled shade, preferably protected from strong wind.

**Heat/drought:** tolerant of heat and drought. Requires occasional water, especially during drought—the more sun, the more water needed.

**Soil:** rich or sandy well-drained soil.

**Pruning:** requires very little pruning—only removal of dead, diseased, damaged, poorly formed material, or a branch that has reverted to green.

## **Cornus controversa 'Variegata'** **(Wedding Cake Tree)**

This tree lights up the shade with its brightly variegated leaves and fine pagoda-like structure. Attracts bees and butterflies.

**Native range:** China, Korea, the Himalayas, and Japan

**Zones:** 5-8

**Size:** 18'

**Sun:** light or open shade—site where it has plenty of room to spread its horizontal branches.

**Heat/drought:** some shade appreciated in areas with hot summers. Average moisture required and needs watering during dry weather.

**Soil:** moist and well drained soil—can adapt to sandy and clay soils with regular watering.

**Pruning:** the lovely layered form of this tree can easily be ruined by pruning. Consult an expert or take local classes before attempting to prune.

## **Embothrium coccineum (Chilian Fire Tree, Chilian Fire Bush)**

The Chilean Fire tree is dramatic in late spring when it becomes a heart-stopping tower of brilliant red blossoms, humming with hummers and buzzing with bees.

**Native range:** Chile and Argentina

**Zones:** 8a - 11

**Size:** 12 - 30' and narrow. Mine is definitely tall and narrow, though I understand some are multi-stemmed, wider, and shorter.

**Sun:** full sun, though the roots like to remain cool.

**Heat/drought:** successful in oceanic climates like the Pacific Northwest, Great Britain, New Zealand, and Chile. Once established, rarely requires watering.

**Soil:** prefers a fertile, humus-rich acid soil that is well-drained and contains very little phosphorous—fertilize with steer manure to avoid phosphorous.

**Pruning:** generally no pruning required. Just remove dead, diseased, or damaged material.

**Other:** may require shelter from cold, drying winds.

## **Cotinus 'Grace' (Grace Smoke Bush or Smoke Tree)**

A choice, small, deciduous landscape tree, known for its smoky puffs of flowers and spectacular autumn color in glowing reds and oranges.

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**Great Garden Speakers Website** ([www.greatgardenspeakers.com](http://www.greatgardenspeakers.com))

**Native range:** Southeastern US

**Zones:** 4-8

**Size:** 20-30'

**Sun:** thrives in full sun to light shade. Fall color is brighter in full sun.

**Heat/drought:** requires occasional water during dry weather.

**Soil:** prefers well-drained soil.

**Pruning:** while this tree can be awkward as a young plant, it will fill out. With minimal pruning, it will naturally form a small tree over time.

## **Ginkgo biloba (Maidenhair Tree)**

The Ginkgo is an ancient and stunningly beautiful deciduous tree with unusual light-green fan-shaped leaves that in autumn turn a glowing yellow.

**Native range:** millions of years ago this tree proliferated around the world and was thought to have become extinct—until specimens were discovered growing in royal gardens in China.

**Zones:** 4-9

**Size:** 65 - 100', but now many hybrids are available—from dwarf to medium to tall.

**Sun:** prefers full sun, but is relatively shade tolerant.

**Heat/drought:** drought tolerant once established; tolerates pollution and salt spray.

**Soil:** tolerates a wide range of soil types, as long as it is well drained.

**Pruning:** little pruning is needed to maintain—just removal of dead and broken branches, suckers from the base, and poorly formed limbs

## **Koelreuteria paniculata 'Coral Sun' (Coral Sun Golden Rain Tree)**

This cultivar sports intensely colored new growth (coral stems with yellow and orange leaves), yellow summer flowers, and pale yellow fall color.

**Native range:** India

**Zones:** 3-8

**Size:** 25 - 30'.

**Sun:** full sun to light shade.

**Heat/drought:** drought tolerant once established. Adaptable to wind.

**Soil:** amenable to many types of soils, including alkaline and dry poor soils, as long as they are well drained.

**Pruning:** very little pruning is needed to maintain this tree—just remove dead and broken branches and any poorly formed limbs.

## **Oxydendrum arboreum (Sourwood or Sorrell)**

Sourwood is a handsome tree that slowly grows into a narrow pyramidal shape. It produces fragrant long-lasting heather-like white flowers that contrast nicely

with the dark green leaves of summer and the intensely red leaves of autumn. Attractive to honey bees

**Native range:** forests of Southeastern US.

**Zones:** 5-9

**Size:** very slow-growing narrow tree up to 25'.

**Sun:** full sun to light or dappled shade.

**Heat/drought:** once established, only occasional watering, especially during drought.

**Soil:** well-drained soil, but will tolerate sand and clay. Loves growing in duff near the edge of a forest.

**Pruning:** the only pruning needed is the occasional removal of damaged and dead material.

## **Robinia pseudoacacia 'Frisia' (Golden Locust, Frisia, Robinia)**

Yet another jaw-dropping tree that, in full sun, is graced with golden leaves in a fabulous bright lemon yellow hue that lasts through the summer and turns a luscious buttery yellow in autumn. In late spring they develop clusters of fragrant white pea-like flowers attractive to honey bees.

**Native range:** rural eastern US

**Zones:** 4 - 8 or 9

**Size:** grows quickly to 40' or 50' tall.

**Sun:** grows best in full sun, but will tolerate light or open shade where the leaf color will be greener.

**Heat/drought:** drought tolerant once established. Can handle pollution. With only a little extra water, it sails through our dry summers with ease.

**Soil:** adapts readily to a wide range of soil types, including sand and clay, as long as it is well-drained.

**Pruning:** tends to develop dead branches that should be removed along with any damaged branches.

**Other:** disturbing soil beneath a golden locust can cause root suckers that should be removed as close to the underground root source as soon as possible.

## **Stewartia pseudocamellia (Japanese Stewartia, Korean Stewartia)**

Japanese stewartia is one of the most beautiful trees for the Pacific Northwest landscape and is great for small spaces. Saucer-shaped, white flowers embellish the branches in summer, the leaves turn orange, yellow, and red in autumn, and its bark develops an attractive mottled mixture of pink, rusty brown, and gray tones.

**Native range:** Japan and Korea.

**Zones:** 5-8

**Size:** 20 - 40'

**Sun:** full sun to open shade.

**Heat/drought:** water regularly during dry weather.

**Soil:** rich well-drained sandy soil

**Pruning:** little pruning is needed and heavy pruning can ruin the form of this lovely tree. Consult an expert or take a local class before attempting to prune.