

TREES FOR SMALL GARDENS

Peter Williams

Really successful small gardens depend, crucially, upon the selection of good plants. In this context, 'good plants' rarely means small plants but rather, standard or large plants selected carefully for their form, foliage, flowers and fruits. In a small garden, every plant has to earn its keep, and gardens remain successful provided that the plants are viewed as being on 'short term contracts' rather than 'life-long tenure'. Many gardeners adopt this short-term concept with bulbs, herbaceous perennials and shrubs, but tend to exempt the garden trees.

Trees are important in small gardens for numerous reasons, but principally because they provide height and emphasise the three dimensional aspect of the design. Choosing trees for small gardens needs to be done carefully, but fortunately there are many excellent choices available.

The following suggestions are based on trees that I have actual experience of growing and planting in small gardens. Indeed, my interest in propagating trees came from a chance encounter many years ago with a builder who asked whether I would provide landscape advice for his small estates. At the time, he was planting a 'John Downie' flowering crab apple in every front garden, and wanted more variety. Having the confidence of youth, I replied that not only could I make useful suggestions, I could also supply and plant the trees. To fulfil this promise and make it both more interesting and profitable, I started propagating the trees that I recommended and continued doing so for over a decade.

Malus 'John Downie' was a poor choice of small tree because, although it has brightly coloured fruit which make excellent crab-apple jelly, it is very susceptible to mildew which distorts the foliage for much of the growing season. Other *malus* cultivars are, however, first-class plants for small gardens. My favourite *malus* over many years has been *M. sargentii*. This is a very healthy species that produces large, white, scented flowers in spring and small red fruits in autumn. It grows to form a small/medium, round-headed tree that responds well to pruning if required.

In a restricted space, *M. 'Van Eseltine'* is a good choice, because it grows as a slender column with frilly, semi-double scented flowers. Its fruits are small and insignificant but it is disease-resistant, and forms an excellent support for smaller-growing clematis. *M. floribunda* is an excellent small, round-headed tree that flowers very early, with crimson buds opening to a bright red flush of blossom, fading to pink. A specimen in my garden is 25 years old and still only three metres tall. For fruit colour, I believe that it is difficult to beat *M. toringoides*. This species produces small (2cm), ovoid fruits of translucent red that appear to glow in autumn sunshine. The tree itself always stays small, the foliage is healthy, and it flowers much later than most crabs. Of the other *malus* of which I have experience, *M. 'Red Jade'* is the best weeping crab apple. It makes a compact, small tree that does not get ugly with age and responds well to pruning. It will even grow happily for many years in a large pot.



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Malus toringoides

Some of the red-leaved *malus* look attractive in spring but many are very susceptible to mildew. *M. 'Royalty'* and *M. 'Profusion'* are particularly poor in this respect. Some *malus* are sold on the basis of excellent autumn fruits that last throughout winter. Of these, *M. 'Golden Hornet'* is a popular choice, its fruit exactly 'as it says on the tin'. Personally, I do not like this variety because of its rather upright habit and over-large fruit which it deposits under the tree in spring. Over the past few years, there have been many new *malus* varieties introduced. Of these, *M. 'Evereste'* and *M. 'Gorgeous'* are said by many gardeners to be excellent varieties.

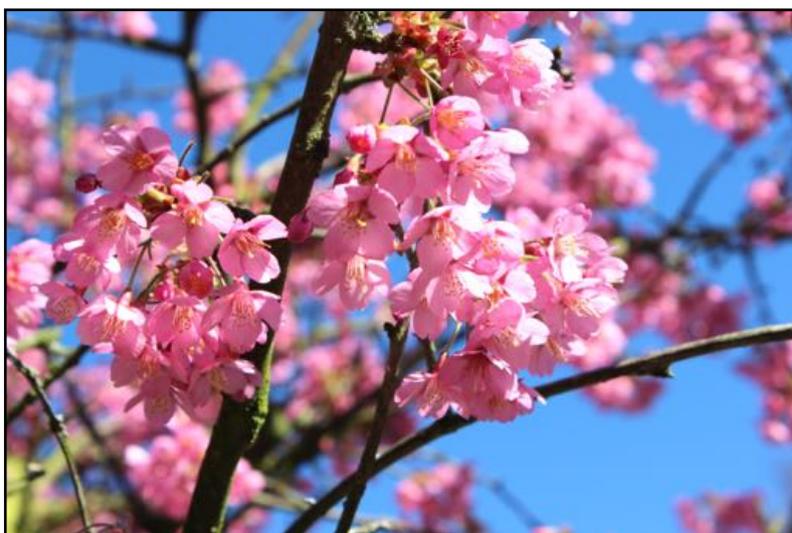
Amongst the mountain ashes there are a few varieties that are often recommended for small gardens. I think that *Sorbus* 'Joseph Rock' is one of the very best. It is generally accepted that it was found in Yunnan province in China. The tree has an upright form and attractive green foliage that turns beautiful shades of red in autumn. The yellow berries that appear in late summer contrast well with the autumn foliage and are not so quickly devoured by garden birds as the red berries.

Other species that are frequently recommended include: *S. cashmiriana* with beautiful white berries, *S. hupehensis* with orange berries, *S.* 'Pink Pagoda' with pink berries that fade to white, and *S. vilmorinii* that has blue-green leaves and berries that fade from red to pink. All sorbus are susceptible to fireblight (as are all members of the rose family including malus, crataegus and amelanchier) but, in my experience, this is only a problem on persistently wet soils. Of the plants mentioned above, *S. cashmiriana* is the most susceptible to disease, and *S.* 'Joseph Rock' the least. They also all belong to the *aucuparia* section, with pinnate leaves.

The *aria* section contains a number of species with entire leaves, including *S. aria* 'Lutescens' (whitebeam) that is frequently recommended for small plots. The variety looks good in spring as its white leaves unfold, but is less appealing for most of the year and it grows very quickly to form a relatively large tree, unsuitable for smaller plots.

Closely related to the mountain ashes are the amelanchiers. In fact, most amelanchier cultivars are grafted onto mountain ash rootstocks. *Amelanchier canadensis* makes a lovely small tree. The young foliage is brilliant copper, the flowers white, and the leaves turn orange/red in autumn. Blueberry-coloured fruit are produced in June (hence its common name: juneberry), but they are so tasty to birds that they are always eaten as they ripen. Amelanchiers will grow on all soils except shallow chalk. With a little pruning, *A. canadensis* can be converted from a multi-stemmed shrub into a small tree with a single stem. *A.* 'Ballerina' is another excellent small, upright-growing tree that is widely available.

At one time, planting a flowering ornamental tree was synonymous with planting a cherry tree. Two varieties were particularly common: *Prunus* 'Kanzan' and *P.* 'Cheal's Weeping'. *P.* 'Kanzan' looks beautiful in a wooded environment, but gets far too large for most gardens. *P.* 'Cheal's Weeping' is nice enough as a young tree, but quickly loses its charm, becoming angular and broad. *P.* 'Weeping Yoshino' is a more elegant weeping tree, but soon becomes too wide for all but the largest garden.



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Prunus 'Kursar' in full bloom

Fortunately, there are some excellent small garden cherries, including *P.* 'Kursar'. Its single, dark cerise, frost-resistant flowers appear very early, sometimes before the end of February, and are highly fragrant. The foliage colours very early in autumn, a brilliant fiery red. I have a specimen that I planted outside my kitchen window 20 years ago and it is still only about three metres tall. *Prunus* 'Amanogowa' is, to my mind, one of the most underrated small trees. It has a very upright growth form, is usually multi-stemmed and very disease resistant. The leaves are bronze when they unfold in spring and turn a beautiful gold in autumn. The semi-double, shell-pink flowers are very fragrant and last for about three weeks.

The winter-flowering cherry, *P. x subhirtella* 'Autumnalis Rosea', is also an excellent small tree. It never gets as showy as the spring-flowering cherries, but during mild winters it can be in flower on Christmas Day. It often throws a few flowers throughout the winter and then has a minor



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The bark of *Prunus serrula*

flourish again in early spring. *P. serrula* is another cherry that comes to the fore in winter. This species has very shiny, mahogany-coloured, mirror-like bark that can be polished to a high sheen. It is very popular in winter gardens and can certainly be considered for small gardens. However, the small white flowers are not as freely produced as other cherries, and it becomes rather angular as it ages. My favourite small cherry is *P. 'Accolade'*. This beautiful tree is a little larger than *P. 'Kursar'* or '*Autumnalis*', but would still suit all but the very smallest gardens. Its graceful, spreading branches carry semi-double, frilly flowers and the foliage produces stunning red/orange colours in early autumn. However, all cherries do poorly on wet soils and *P. 'Accolade'* is the least tolerant.

Whenever small garden trees are considered, one species is mentioned more by garden designers than all others: *Acer griseum*, the paper-bark maple. This maple is a highly desirable small tree with interesting cinnamon-coloured peeling bark, neat foliage that turns brilliant red in autumn, and bunches of largely sterile seeds. Lack of fertile seed, poor germination and a slow growth rate mean that this species is always expensive to buy. Unlike many acers, *A. griseum* is largely trouble-free. My father-in-law, a farmer, had a saying: 'Sheep die for no good reason'. I think the same can be said of many acers. If they don't actually die, many suffer serious die-back of branches and limbs and can become misshapen. When planting out acers from pots, I have found that the larger the plant, the better it establishes, contrary to the general rule on tree planting.

Numerous Japanese acers can grow into small garden trees, and *A. palmatum 'Osakazuki'* is particularly reliable. This variety has attractive five or seven-lobed leaves that turn vivid red in autumn. The seed is fertile and germinates easily to produce seedlings in a range of colours that can go on to grow into lovely small trees. I have had far less success with snakebark maples, such as *A. capillipes*, that grow for a year or two and then suffer serious dieback or, like sheep, just die!



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Acer griseum

Some small trees should definitely come with a health warning, and should probably be avoided. Included in this group would be most top-worked trees, i.e. where the cultivar is grafted onto the top of the rootstock stem at about one metre. The rootstock almost always grows faster than the grafted variety and the union usually becomes enlarged and ugly. The worst culprit is the Kilmarnock willow, *Salix caprea 'Kilmarnock'*. In the garden centre this top-worked tree looks wonderful in early spring with its small grey pussy willows opening on graceful weeping branches. But the tree does not age well. Branches die, and in a few years the graft union becomes ugly. *Prunus triloba* is another plant of this sort - lovely child, difficult adult! I would also put *Acer pseudoplatanus 'Brilliantissimum'* in this group. This flashy sycamore has brilliantly coloured new growth and is very appealing in spring but, within a few weeks, it becomes very drab and remains so for the rest of the year. *Robinia pseudoacacia 'Frisia'*, sadly, also now enters the category of plants to avoid. It was a very popular smallish tree, and I particularly liked the fresh golden foliage that did not dull all summer. Unfortunately, about ten years ago, it began to suffer serious dieback and many specimens that I know have been removed.