Virginia Cooperative Extension
Virginia Tech • Virginia State University

EXPERT REVIEWED

426-604

Selecting Landscape Plants: Rare and Unusual Trees

Authored by Diane Relf, Extension Specialist, Horticulture, Virginia Tech, Bonnie Appleton, Extension Specialist, Horticulture, Virginia Tech, and updated by David Close, Extension Specialist, Consumer Horticulture, School of Plant and Environmental Sciences, Virginia Tech

Introduction

There are many tree species that can be successfully grown in Virginia, but are rarely seen in our landscapes. Although not ordinarily recommended or readily available, these trees may be useful to carry out a specific landscape theme, to substitute for an exotic type which is not locally adapted, or may be prized for unusual form, flowers, fruits, bark, or foliage.

Trees listed in this publication are reasonably reliable and most are hardy throughout the state. Those that may have difficulty tolerating the heat of the Tidewater area are appropriately noted.

Trees included in this list range from occasionally available to rare. With persistence, most of them can be found in landscape or mail order nurseries. Unusual forms of common tree species such as corkscrew willow, columnar or cutleaf maples, and trees with unusual foliage color are not included. Brooklyn Botanic Gardens Handbook No. 63, *1200 Trees and Shrubs - Where to Buy Them*, is an excellent source of information on where to obtain plants that are not commonly available in nurseries and garden centers. It may be ordered from the Brooklyn Botanic Gardens, Brooklyn, New York 11225.

Rare or Unusual Shade Trees

European Beech ***Fagus sylvatica***

The European beech is better adapted to Virginia growing conditions than the native American beech. However, it is still a difficult plant to grow. The dark green, glossy foliage and smooth, light gray bark make it a very hand- some tree. Many unusual cultivars have been elected from this species, including cultivars with unusual form, variable leaf shape, or unusual colored foliage. Beech is difficult to establish. Never fertilize a beech tree until it is well established. May not tolerate the heat in the Tidewater area (Zone 8). (50-60 ft. height; 35-45 ft. spread)

Chinese Chestnut ***Castanea mollissima***

Chinese chestnut is resistant to the destructive chestnut blight disease, which has almost entirely destroyed the native American chestnut. Several government agencies have promoted planting this tree for both ornamental use and nut production. The flowers are produced in long, showy catkins in early summer; nuts, which are excellent for eating, are produced in large, prickly burs that are a nuisance in the lawn where they have fallen. Therefore, it should only be planted in areas where the burs will not be aproblem. Tolerates hot, dry areas well. (40-60 ft. height; 40-60 ft. spread)

European Hornbeam ***Carpinus betulus***

Hornbeam is a slow growing, pyramidal tree while young, becoming rounded at maturity. Light gray bark covers its smoothly ridged or flattened trunk. Delicate, elm-like leaves and a dense branching habit characterize the tree. The seeds are borne in hanging clusters of leaf-like struc- tures. Several improved cultivars of hornbeam have been developed, of which 'Columnaris,' a narrow, pyramidal treewith dense branches, is the most popular, being useful as a screen and hedge plant. Hornbeam is difficult to trans- plant, so should be moved while small. It is a relatively pest free tree. (40-60 ft. height; 30-40 ft. spread)

Katsura Tree ***Cercidiphyllum japonicum***

This is a large, rounded-to-spreading tree often with more than one trunk. The leaves, about the same size

and shapeas redbud leaves but with a serrate or toothed rather than smooth leaf margin, develop scarlet to yellow fall color. Katsura trees are essentially pest free. Though somewhat difficult to transplant, they make outstanding shade trees and should be more widely planted. (40-60 ft. height; variable 20-60 ft. spread)

Paperbark Maple ***Acer griseum***
This round-headed, rather open maple grows moderately fast while young. The bright, copper-colored bark peels off in paper-like strips creating intense winter interest. The compound leaves resemble box elder and have no special ornamental value. Paperbark maple is best used as a lawn or specimen tree where it is visible in winter. It tolerates a wide range of soils and exposures; may need extra water during hot summers in the Tidewater area. (20-30 ft. height; spread: 1/2 to equal height)

Silver Linden ***Tilia tomentosa***
This is a beautiful specimen tree that tolerates heat and drought better than other lindens. The upper leaf surface is dark green, but the undersides are densely covered with hairs, which give them a silver color. When the leaves are blown in the wind, the silver undersurfaces can be seen, giving a beautiful effect. This tree should not be planted in areas where there is a large amount of dust or soot present as it will collect on the hairy leaves and make them unsightly. Flowers of this species have been reported to be poisonous to bees. (50-70 ft. height; 25-40 ft. spread)

Turkish Filbert or Hazel ***Corylus colurna***
Turkish filbert is a well-shaped ornamental tree with a regular, pyramidal habit of growth. The rough, corky bark and heavy crop of catkins, produced in March, make this a worthwhile ornamental tree. It is especially adapted for planting in hot, dry areas. No major insect or disease problems; may not adapt well to the Tidewater area unless well-watered the first few years after transplanting. (40-50 ft. height; 15-40 ft. spread)

Rare or Unusual Flowering Trees

Amur Maackia ***Maackia amurensis***
Maackia is moderately fast growing, developing a roundedhead at maturity. Its major interest is the small, white, late summer flowers that are arranged in branched clusters4 to 6 inches long, although its bronze-colored bark can add winter landscape interest. It is widely adapted and can be easily grown. No major pest problems. (20-30 ft. height; 20-30 ft. spread)

Chinese Redbud ***Cercis chinensis***
A far showier member of the redbud genus, this multi-stemmed, small tree will be heavily covered with vivid rosy- pink to purple flowers about the same time in early spring as the Eastern redbud. Tolerant of poor soils and hot loca- tions, it makes an excellent specimen or screen. (10-20 ft. height; 15-20 ft. spread)

Korean Evodia ***Evodia daniellii***
Small, white flowers of evodia are produced in large, flat clusters similar to those of some viburnums. The flowers are not especially showy but they appear in late summer when few other trees are in bloom. Bees are especially attracted to the flowers. Red capsules that split open to reveal shiny black seeds follow them. No serious pests areknown. (25-30 ft. height; 25-30 ft. spread)

Goldenchain ***Laburnum x watereri***
Goldenchain tree is a striking sight in mid-spring when it is covered with foot-long, pendulous clusters of bright yellow flowers. It is a vase-shaped tree that grows fairly rapidly. The goldenchain tree grows best during cool, moist summers and may therefore be difficult to grow in the Tidewater area. (12-15 ft. height; 9-12 ft. spread)

Franklinia ***Franklinia alatamaha***
Growing Franklinia is a real challenge to the home gardener. It is difficult to establish, but once established it is a truly beautiful tree. Franklinia was discovered in Georgia; however, no native trees have been found since 1790. All of the trees growing today are descendants of the ones collected before that time. It is an upright, slow growing tree, noted for its large, white, fragrant flowers, which open in late summer. The foliage turns orange to red in the fall. A fertile, moist, well-drained soil is preferred. Avoid hot, dry exposures. No serious pests of Franklinia have been reported. (10-30 ft. height; 6-15 ft. spread)

Japanese Stewartia ***Stewartia pseudocamellia***
Dense, lustrous foliage, showy flowers, yellow to reddish purple fall color, and flaking, varicolored bark combine to make the Stewartias beautiful at all seasons of the year. Two-inch, single, white flowers create a spectacle in mid-summer when few other trees are in

bloom. The old bark peels off in irregular patches revealing lighter colored, inner bark and thereby providing intense winter interest. It is difficult to transplant and should be planted while small. It grows best in a protected location, on good soils with a regular supply of moisture. (30-40 ft. height; spread 20-25 ft.)

Carolina Silverbell ***Halesia carolina***
Silverbell is an attractive, moderately fast growing, native tree. The delicate, white, bell-shaped flowers, about 1/2-inch long, appear in late spring. They hang all along the underside of the previous year's branches, making a uniquely beautiful sight when in bloom. Two-to-four winged seedpods add interest in the fall of the year. The mountain silverbell, *H. monticola*, is a larger tree with much larger flowers (2 inches long) but is more difficult to find in nurseries. Either species should be planted where it can be observed at close range. Both species are free from serious pest problems. Don't plant in heavy or wet soils, and avoid hot, dry exposures in the Tidewater area. (30-45 ft. height; 20-35 ft. spread)

Japanese Snowbell ***Styrax japonicus***
This unique, small tree is often wider than it is tall. Grace-ful, small, waxy, white flowers hang from the curving hori- zontal branches in early summer. Flowers appear after the leaves are fully developed, but the leaves are arranged on the upper side of the branches leaving pendulous flowers clearly evident below. The dark green leaves, wide spread- ing growth habit, and beautiful flowers combine to makethis an outstanding specimen tree. It needs rich soil and adequate summer moisture. No serious pests are known. (20-30 ft. height; 20-30 ft. spread)

Japanese Tree Lilac ***Syringa reticulata***
(Formerly S. *amurensis japonica*)

Tree lilac is a small tree with rounded to spreading growth habit. Large clusters of fragrant, white flowers appear in mid-June, about four to six weeks after common lilac has bloomed. Shiny, cherry-like bark develops on the trunk and larger branches, adding interest in winter. It tolerates a wide range of growing conditions but, unfortunately, it is susceptible to most of the pests that bother common lilac, though to a lesser degree, and may not tolerate hot summers in the Tidewater area. (20-30 ft. height; 15-25 ft. spread)

Cedar of Lebanon ***Cedrus libani***
The needle-like foliage of this highly unusual tree is produced in bunches on older twigs and singly on current season's growth. It is prized for its dark green foliage, picturesque habit of growth, and ornamental cones. Massive forests in the now barren Biblical lands were made up of this species. It is said to have been used for timbers in Solomon's Temple. Blue atlas cedar (*C. atlantica glauca*), a closely related species, is similar to the cedar of Lebanon except that it has bluish colored needles. They should be planted in good soil in a sunny, protected location.

Avoid planting in wet or heavy soils. May have difficulty in the Tidewater area where the deodar cedar (*C. deodara*)can be used. (40-60 ft. height; 40-60 ft. spread)

Falsecypress ***Chamaecyparis* spp.**
Falsecypress is adapted to a cool, moist climate and tends to be scorched and discolored by drought and drying winter winds. Falsecypress comprise a group of slow growing, dense, pyramidal evergreens with a wide variety of foliage colors and textures. The cultivars of Hinoki falsecypress (C. *obtusa*) are better adapted to Virginia than the others. 'Erecta' forms a slender column, 'Filicoides' has twisting frond-like foliage and 'Gracilis' is a slender tree with weeping branchlets. The varieties of Sawara falsecypress (*C. pisifera*) offer great diversity in foliage and tree form. (40-75 ft. height; 10-20 ft. spread)

Bristlecone Pine ***Pinus aristata***
One of the oldest living plants in the world, living specimenbristlecone pines growing in Arizona and Nevada are over 4,000 years old. It is becoming popular in landscape plant- ings primarily because of its dense, short needles and its picturesque growth habit. It is very slow growing (suitable for bonsai) and endures a hot, dry exposure but does not tolerate shade. (8-20 ft. height; spread: irregular)

Japanese Red Pine ***Pinus densiflora***
A picturesque tree with a distinct, flat-topped growth habit, often used for bonsai. The cones are produced in dense clusters. Orange-red bark is interesting throughout the year.A dwarf, flat-topped cultivar, Tanyosho pine, is commonly grown as a shrub. It will grow to about 6 feet in height. (40-60 ft. height; 40-60 ft. spread)

Lacebark Pine ***Pinus bungeana***

Lacebark pine is a relatively slow growing tree. It often develops with more than one trunk. The needles are about 3 inches long and are grouped three to a bundle. Needles are retained on the tree several years longer than on most pines, making the tree especially dense. The bark peels off the trunk and branches in irregular patches, producing a beautiful mottled effect. It has not been planted widely enough for its susceptibility to pests to be known. (30-50 ft. height; 20-35 ft. spread)

Swiss Stone Pine ***Pinus cembra***

This is a slow-growing pine with a dense, pyramidal habit of growth. It is very similar to white pine in foliage color and texture. It will grow on a wide variety of soils and exposures. Little is known about its susceptibility to disease. May not tolerate Tidewater area heat well. (30-40 ft. height; 15-25 ft. spread)

Umbrella Pine ***Sciadopitys verticillata***

Umbrella pine is a very slow growing (perhaps one-half foot per year), dense evergreen with large, lustrous, flattened needles arranged in whorls around the stems. It is best used as a specimen because of its unique beauty and dense pyramidal shape. Avoid hot, dry locations in the Tidewater area and maintain mulch under the plant. Little other maintenance is required. (20-30 ft. height; 15-20 ft. spread)

Serbian Spruce ***Picea omorika***

This densely narrow evergreen has short branches and graceful, drooping branchlets. The dense, glossy needles are a whitish color. It is slow growing and performs best on good soils with adequate summer moisture. Probably would not grow successfully in the Tidewater area due to summer heat. (50-60 ft. height; 20-25 ft. spread)

Veitch Fir ***Abies veitchii***

The needles of this stiffly pyramidal evergreen are a dark green above and a whitish color below. This is one of the hardiest of the firs, but should not be planted in southeastern Virginia due to heat intolerance. It is a relatively slow growing tree with horizontal branches. (50-75 ft. height; 25-35 ft. spread)

Japanese Cedar ***Cryptomeria Japonica*** **or** ***Cryptomeria***

An interesting specimen or screen in protected areas that prevent it from turning to brown in the winter. Fast growing, with unusual foliage similar to the interior tropical plant, the Norfolk Island pine. (50-60 ft. height; 20-30 ft.spread)

Deciduous Conifers

The deciduous conifers are an unusual group of trees. Their foliage is needle-like, similar to narrow leafed evergreens, but it is shed in the fall of the year.

Dawn Redwood ***Metasequoia glyptostroboides***

Dawn redwood was believed to be extinct until 1945 when a Chinese botanist discovered it growing in a remote valley of central China. Three years later a botanical expedition obtained seeds from these and distributed them to botanical gardens and arboreta throughout the world. It is a fast-growing, pyramidal tree with a tendency to grow late in the season, which results in some twig dieback. The loose, feathery, needle-like foliage drops quickly in the fall. Better-than-average, moist soils are preferred. No serious pests are known. (70-100 ft. height; 25 ft. spread)

Golden Larch ***Pseudolarix kaempferi***

(formerly *P. amabilis*)

This broadly pyramidal tree makes an unusual ornamental.It needs plenty of room to grow, as it is often as broad as it is tall. Horizontal branches bear handsomely tufted needles, which turn yellow in the fall before they drop to reveal the interesting branching habit. The unusual, flower like cones are attractive through summer and fall. This tree grows best on deep, moist soils. (30-50 ft. height; 20-40 ft. spread)

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Produced by Virginia Cooperative Extension, Virginia Tech, 2021

VT/0521/426-604 (SPES-320P)