

## HOME-GARDEN

# Small, native ornamental trees offer beauty, structure and more

**Steve Conaway** Special to the Telegram & Gazette USA TODAY NETWORK

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## Key Points

Small, native ornamental trees can be used to break up open areas, frame views, and provide intimate interest.

Many small trees provide spectacular spring flowers, attractive summer foliage, vibrant fall color, and even winter interest through bark or branching habit.

Small ornamental trees are terrifically useful, offering beauty, structure, and seasonal interest without overwhelming smaller residential spaces. While they are perfectly suited to compact gardens and urban lots, these trees are equally valuable in larger landscapes, where they can be used to break up open areas, frame views, and provide intimate interest. Walking through the Inner Park at [New England Botanic Garden at Tower Hill](#), for example, the immense white pines create a cathedral-like enclosure, yet it is the colorful flowers of redbuds at eye level that greet visitors and make the space feel welcoming and alive.

One of the great advantages of small trees is their multi-seasonal appeal. Many provide spectacular spring flowers, attractive summer foliage, vibrant fall color, and even winter interest through bark or branching habit. Because they typically mature between 15- and 40-feet tall, small ornamental trees fit comfortably near homes and patios. They also allow gardeners to enjoy fine details, flowers, bark texture, fruit, and leaf shape, that might be lost on a larger tree.

Among the finest native flowering trees are the silverbells (*Halesia carolina* and *H. monticola*). Although these trees can reach impressive heights of 40 feet in the wild,

they are more often grown as small trees or large, multi-stemmed shrubs in cultivation. The white, bell-shaped flowers that appear in spring hang gracefully beneath the branches. These blooms are followed by distinctive four-winged fruits that persist into fall.

Flowering dogwood (*Cornus florida*) is a beloved ornamental tree native to the eastern United States. Dogwoods offer a graceful, layered branching habit and stunning spring display. What appear to be large white flowers are actually showy bracts surrounding small, true flowers at the center. Dogwood foliage is deep green through summer and turns shades of red in fall, while bright red fruits attract wildlife. An introduced fungal disease called dogwood anthracnose has greatly impacted wild populations of this native tree and harms cultivated flowering dogwoods in gardens. Disease-resistant cultivars have been developed as well as hybrids of Chinese dogwood (*Cornus kousa*) that are less susceptible. Although dogwoods are naturally adapted to shady understory conditions, anthracnose also thrives in the shade, so successful garden plantings should be sited in full sun.

Another favorite is the native eastern redbud (*Cercis canadensis*). In early spring, magenta-pink flowers emerge directly along branches and even the trunk, highlighting the tree's natural form. Large, heart-shaped leaves follow and provide lush texture all season.

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Modern cultivars have expanded the ornamental options of redbuds, offering weeping forms, variable flowers, and foliage colors ranging from deep maroon like the 'Forest Pansy' to splashes of white variegation in 'Alley Cat.' Rising Sun™ redbud creates an ombre of peachy orange transitioning to chartreuse. The appropriately named Flame Thrower® redbud fires out branches with a kaleidoscope of leaf colors in shades of red, orange, and gold. In colder corners of New England, gardeners should be cautious about the hardiness of cultivars bred from southern stock. Northern Herald® and other named varieties boast a track record of solid cold hardiness.

Serviceberry (*Amelanchier spp.*) includes many species native to New England. With time, the small multi-stemmed shrubs grow into graceful vase-shaped trees that produce a cloud of delicate-petaled flowers in early spring. This tree's other common name, juneberry, is fully realized when a bounty of delicious blueberry-like fruits with sweet, apple flavor appears in shades of burgundy, pink, and purple. You can snack side-by-side with the birds on these delicious seasonal treats. The serviceberry keeps giving to the garden when leaves change to brilliant scarlet and gold.

Two small native trees that are less commonly used but feature out of the ordinary interest are hoptree (*Ptelea trifoliata*) and bladdernut (*Staphylea trifolia*). Their subtle flowers and unique fruits may not be showy from a distance, but they reward closer inspection and can become conversation-piece specimens in naturalistic or woodland gardens.

Small ornamental trees bring scale, beauty, and intimacy to outdoor spaces. Whether used as a single focal point, in a small grove, or woven into mixed plantings, they create moments of seasonal delight and character. These trees become defining features of the landscape — proof that great impact does not always come from great size.

*Gardening Central Mass. offers ecologically focused tips and helpful stories for home gardeners from New England Botanic Garden at Tower Hill CEO Grace Elton and Director of Horticulture Steven Conaway. Located in Boylston, New England Botanic Garden creates experiences with plants that inspire people and improve the world. Learn more at [nebg.org](https://nebg.org). The column is published on the third Sunday of the month.*

