Street Trees for Central Florida

Street trees are an integral part of any urban landscape. Street trees are trees that are used along roads and highways. Often this location encompasses the area between the sidewalk and the road. Street trees provide needed shade around hot, paved areas. They provide habitat and sometimes food to urban wildlife. They can also help “green-up” an area and improve aesthetics. Not all trees are suitable street trees. There are many factors to consider when planting street trees. Some can get much too large or have damaging roots that can cause problems years into the future. Trees along a street have to be able to tolerate sometimes harsh conditions. Soil can be limited and of poor quality. The soil near a street often has a high pH level so the tree has to be able to tolerate alkaline soil. Irrigation is sometimes not available or adequate enough. Trees should be able to tolerate periods of drought. High pollution levels from vehicle’s exhaust on busy streets can cause problems to the trees. The height of the tree must be taken into consideration if there are power lines overhead. Too many times a tree that will eventually grow too tall is planted under or near power lines. This causes maintenance problems in the future. Too often the tree is then pruned into a grotesque shape or it has to be removed. As a general guide, if there are power lines overhead, it is recommended not to plant a tree that will grow taller than 15 feet. All these factors limit which trees can be used smartly and successfully along streets. Below are some trees that can be used as street trees in central Florida. Some are strictly shade trees; others produce ornamental flowers and provide color during their peak season.

**Bauhinia x blakeana**, the Hong Kong Orchid Tree, grows 20 to 30 feet tall. It bears very showy orchid-like flowers from autumn until late spring. These flowers are reddish-purple in color and are slightly fragrant. Hong Kong Orchid Tree is a fast grower and drought tolerant. It is a hybrid between *B. purpurea* and *B. variegata*. Both of these parents are common but are not recommended as they produce large amounts of seedlings and can become a nuisance. The Hong Kong Orchid Tree is a sterile hybrid and will not produce seed.

**Cassia leptophylla**, or Gold Medallion Tree, is a native to southeastern Brazil. It is fast growing, cold hardy, and bears white flowers throughout the year. It only grows 10-15 feet tall and is native to southern Texas and northern Mexico. It loves a hot and sunny location and needs little care once it is established.

**Ceiba speciosa**, the Floss Silk Tree, is a spectacular specimen that makes a great street tree. It is fast growing, reaching 30-50 feet tall. It bears large amounts of large pink flowers in fall. The flowers are variable from almost white to deep pink. The trunk of this tree is usually covered in large, ornamental spines but individuals with smooth trunks exist. The Floss Silk Tree is very drought tolerant and is native from Brazil to Peru. It was formerly known as *Chorisia speciosa*. The related *C. chodatii* bears yellow flowers and *C. insignis* bears white flowers. *C. crispiflora* has pink flowers with narrow petals and usually flowers in summer. Many hybrids between these four species exist.

**Cordia boisseri**, Ancachuita or White Cordia Tree, is one of the best flowering trees for this area. It is fast growing, cold hardy, and bears white flowers throughout the year. It only grows 10-15 feet tall and is native to southern Texas and northern Mexico. It loves a hot and sunny location and needs little care once it is established.
**Elaeocarpus decipiens**, Japanese Blueberry Tree, is a handsome evergreen tree native to southern Japan, southern China, and Taiwan. It has a moderate rate of growth and can reach 30 to 40 feet tall. The leaves are dark green in color and turn red before dropping. It bears very small white flowers in summer, which are followed by inedible but ornamental bluish-black colored berries.

**Eucalyptus polyanthemos**, the Red Box Tree, is often called the Silver Dollar Tree. This name usually refers to a related tree, *Eucalyptus cinerea*. The Red Box Tree is evergreen with round leaves that are an attractive silvery green color. The tree is fast growing, reaches 30 to 40 feet tall. Young specimens have a very tight and upright growth habit but loosen up as they mature. Older trees have an open, spreading habit and some have a gnarled and picturesque look to them. Southern Red Cedar is very drought tolerant once established. They produce small cones that are powdery blue and berry-like.

**Ilex cassine**, Dahoon Holly, is a Florida native that grows 20 to 30 feet tall. It is evergreen and the female trees bear bright red berries in winter. Dahoon Holly can tolerate wet soil but is also very drought tolerant. Hybrids between them. Southern Red Cedar is very drought tolerant once established. They produce small cones that are powdery blue and berry-like.

**Jacaranda mimosifolia**, Jacaranda Tree, is a showy bloomer that bears small, trumpet-shaped flowers that are blue-violent in color. These flowers appear in spring making the tree a spectacular sight. Jacaranda is native to Argentina and Bolivia. It grows 30-40 feet tall and is fast growing. It is also very drought tolerant. The cultivar ‘Alba’ bears white flowers. The similar *J. cuspidefolia*, from southern Brazil and Argentina, bears larger flowers that appear in the summer. These flowers are usually more purple than blue in color.

**Juniperus silicicola**, is known as the Southern Red Cedar. This native Florida conifer is an evergreen and grows 30 to 40 feet tall. Young specimens have a very tight and upright growth habit but loosen up as they mature. Older trees have an open, spreading habit and some have a gnarled and picturesque look to them. Southern Red Cedar is very drought tolerant once established. They produce small cones that are powdery blue and berry-like.

**Lagerstroemia fauriei**, or Japanese Crepe Myrtle, is not widely used in central Florida. It is a tall growing tree that can reach 30 to 50 feet tall and is native to southern Japan. It bears small clusters of white flowers during the summer. The chief attribute that makes this tree attractive is its trunk and bark. Several times a year the bark will exfoliate and peel off. The grayish bark reveals a smooth, coppery red trunk that is very eye catching, especially during winter when the tree is bare of leaves. Japanese Crepe Myrtle is resistant to powdery mildew and is often used in breeding hybrids with the common Crepe Myrtle, *Lagerstroemia indica*. Most of these hybrids have been named after Native American tribes and are commonly found in local nurseries. Several of these make excellent specimens for street planting where power lines are present. Too often the wrong cultivars are used and have to be butchered each spring too keep them from interfering with power lines. A couple of common cultivars, ‘Muskoge’ and ‘Natchez’, can grow 20 to 30 feet tall and are not appropriate near power lines. A few that can be grown under the lines without any problem include ‘Acoma’ (white), ‘Catawba’ (dark purple), ‘Lipan’ (lavender), ‘Sioux’ (dark pink), and ‘Tonto’ (hot pink).

**Liquidambar formosana**, Formosan Sweetgum, is native to Taiwan, southern China, and northern Vietnam. It is an Asian relative to our native American Sweetgum, *Liquidambar styraciflua*. It differs in having a 3-lobed leaf instead of the familiar star-shaped leaf of the American Sweetgum. It is also deciduous and the leaves often turn an orangish-red before dropping in winter. This tree is fairly fast growing and can reach 30 to 50 feet tall.

– Eric Schmidt

**First of a two-part series**