

Small Native Trees for the Landscape

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One of the landscaping issues that is often raised is the lack of small trees in a landscape. Too often landscapes include a lawn, small shrubs and tall shade trees with no small sized trees that would help link the shade trees to the small shrubs and lawn. In addition to addressing the landscape principle of providing a link between the tall shade trees and shrubs, small trees also are important if you are seeking to attract birds to the landscape. They are key habitat for cardinals, mockingbirds, and other species. There are a number of native plant species to consider for adding small trees to the landscape.

Mexican plums are desirable for their appearance, drought tolerance, and appeal to wildlife. They usually grow to about 15 feet tall with a dense compact crown that is 20 feet in diameter. The fragrant white blooms appear in early spring shortly after the redbud blooms. The species works as a specimen plant in full sun or as an understory tree. Planted in a set of three they have a disciplined appearance but also meet the needs for wildlife cover and produce plums that ripen in mid-summer.

Some of the native trees described in this article are difficult to find in the retail nursery trade, Mexican plum, however, is available at most neighborhood nurseries.

Brasil, also called condalia, is just as desirable as Mexican plum as wildlife habitat but is more likely to be preserved for that purpose than planted to complement tall shade trees in a San Antonio area landscape. Brasil is evergreen with small light green colored leaves on a 15-foot tree. The blooms are not showy, but the plant produces berries during most of the growing season. Beyond providing wildlife habitat, brasil with its thorns and dense crown is effective when used on property borders as an understory plant to make it difficult to penetrate the property.

Brasil can be grown from seed and is sometimes available from nurseries or plant societies that specialize in growing and selling native plants.

Mexican olive is an evergreen tree that grows to 20 feet tall with 4-inch leaves that produce very attractive clusters of 2-inch white blooms. Flowers are produced all summer long and are followed by a round fruit that has the look of an olive but is not related. In my experience the berries aren't a favorite of wildlife. The Mexican olive is hard to match as a specimen plant in full sun. It also will effectively fill up any available space on the edge of a thicket of trees. Its only negative feature is that it is relative cold sensitive. Trees in San Antonio frequently lose their leaves in the winter in reaction to freezes and have frozen back to the ground in especially cold years.

Watch for Mexican olive seedlings at native plant sales. They grow quickly to full size.

Most native tree species are drought tolerant, but it is hard not to credit the desert willow with being the most drought tolerant. During deep droughts when many other landscape plants are just hanging on, the desert willow is at its best. The species grows to 20 feet tall with airy, deciduous foliage. The 3-inch tubular, orchid-like blooms are favorite nectar sources for hummingbirds especially in hot droughty weather. Desert willow is most useful as a specimen plant in full sun on well drained dry sites. Available flower colors include white, pink, burgundy. My favorite, a Paul Cox release, is called "Bubba" has a purple flower. Most nurseries offer one or more selection of desert willow.

Other native plants to consider to fill the small tree gap in a landscape are Texas persimmon, Texas redbud, anaqua, Texas mountain laurel, la coma (bumelia), huisache, Mexican buckeye, retama, and wax myrtle.