Introduction

During the past several decades the American cityscape has seen radical changes. Large areas have been cleared of natural vegetation to accommodate new residential subdivisions, shopping malls, freeways, and airports. Condominiums and large apartment complexes have proliferated, replacing single family residential areas. Streets have been widened to allow for greatly increased traffic flow and the installation of new utility lines. The large trees once shading these streets have been removed. As a result, the “Urban Forest”—consisting of all city trees natural and planted—has been severely and negatively impacted.

The Urban Forest provides major services to the community. In addition to enhancing our quality of life through beautifying our gardens, parks, playgrounds, and roadways, trees reduce water runoff and erosion and augment the seeping of water into the aquifer. Trees produce oxygen, absorb carbon dioxide and gaseous pollutants, trap particulates, and reduce summer temperatures. Those with pulmonary and cardiovascular problems fare better in air “cleaned” by trees. In fact, we are all benefited, although there are a few of us who react unfavorably to certain seasonal pollens and other tree products.

In February 2003, Dr. Michael P. Dombeck, former chief of the U.S. Forest Service, published a study in the Chicago Tribune indicating that we are losing four trees through clearing and grading for every tree planted in real estate and other land developments. This is a wake-up call for the critical need that exists for greatly increased planting in the Urban Forest and the need to popularize small trees appropriate for planting in diminished urban landscape spaces.

Small Trees for the Tropical Landscape lists 129 species and subspecies and 48 named varieties, cultivars, and forms, plus 23 hybrids appropriate for the home garden and for confined public landscape spaces unable to accommodate larger-growing species formerly in common use. They all contribute to the total of urban ecological, health, and beautification benefits enhancing our lives. “Small trees” are defined as those that—under optimal horticultural practices—may grow up to approximately 30 feet in height. Variation must be expected, however, due to soil and rainfall differences and to the level of care provided by the gardener. Also, many references frequently vary widely in recording heights, which may be attributed to environmental differences and/or clonal variation. The authors’ practical, local experience has been a major factor in listing appropriate small trees.

We have included several species that, in time, will or may grow to a greater height than that of our definition of a small tree. The tree, however, will probably stay within our height limit for the life of the garden or the life of its gardener. In each case, these have been so noted. These are highly useful species and should not, in the view of the authors, be ignored.

The second portion of the text, “Tailored Small Trees,” beginning on page 126, is rather unorthodox but very useful for the small property. It recommends the planting of large shrubs to be used in the Urban Forest—shrubs that may be readily transformed into appropriate small trees or “tailored trees” through intelligent, selective pruning. This special section lists sixty-eight species and subspecies, forty named varieties and cultivars and forms, and twenty-one hybrids that are appropriate for this conversion.

This publication is in compliance with the Hawai‘i-Pacific Weed Risk Assessment Project (HPWRA). See Appendix A.

Plant Names

Trees are listed alphabetically by genus. For the most part, the scientific names are those appearing in A Tropical Garden Flora by Dr. George W. Staples and Dr. Derral R. Herbst. Other taxonomic and descriptive resources are listed in the bibliography. Every effort has been made to obtain the most current correct plant name. Errors are the sole responsibility of the authors. Common names for plants vary widely throughout the world. Those most commonly used in Hawai‘i, plus Hawaiian plant names where appropriate, have been selected. Where no common name was found, we have taken the liberty of suggesting one.
Plant Selection

The following are helpful guidelines for the selection of the best small tree for the home landscape, condominium/apartment complexes, and public areas with restricted landscape spaces:

1. Determine the function of the small tree: to shade a walkway, as foundation planting, as a focal point, for screening or windbreak, and so forth;
2. Determine desired characteristics such as height (within the range offered), color of foliage, or flowers;
3. List your site’s environmental characters: rainfall, wind exposure and amount of sunshine (both problems are complicated by high-rise structures), salt air exposure, and soil quality;
4. List possible negative considerations (toxic sap, thorns, allergies, excessive leaf or fruit fall)
5. Use the tree guide to match landscape needs toward making selections providing minimal maintenance and maximum satisfaction.

Several appendices at the end of this guide will serve to assist the gardener with selection. A list of references provides sources of information that will greatly augment the gardener’s understanding and appreciation of small tropical trees.

A Word to the Wise Gardener

Plants produce a wide range of chemical substances as well as physical properties that must be considered in making small tree selections. Some have thorns, irritating hairs or sap, and even poisons that may create problems if not recognized and dealt with. Of major concern to parents are plants that contain toxins that might be fatal to small children. Reactions vary from adult person to adult person and from child to child depending on the amount of exposure and body weight. Teach your children not to smell, pick, and—especially—ingest leaves and flowers. To be certain, stress that ALL leaves and flowers are to be avoided—not touched, chewed, or swallowed. Those species in the text that may pose problems are marked as follows: (T) after the common name indicates the presence of thorns; (S) indicates species known to have caused skin, eye, mouth, or throat irritations; (P) indicates plants with toxic sap, leaves, flowers, or seeds; and (+) indicates plants deserving extra care when handling.

Nitrogen Fixing

A number of plants have the ability to absorb nitrogen from the atmosphere and convert it to a form available to the plant in the soil. This is a great advantage in the garden. In the plant lists that follow, nitrogen fixers are noted by the addition of (N) following the common name. (NP) indicates that other species of the same genus are listed as nitrogen fixers, and there is a high probability that this species is also a nitrogen fixer.