



# Spring-flowering Trees

In just a few weeks, twigs now invisible against the winter background will suddenly fill their expanse with as much color and bloom as a good-sized flowerbed. We barely notice them now, but their day is coming.

“If you want to create a garden for a year, then fill the borders with flowers. But if you want to create a garden for a lifetime, then plant it with trees and shrubs.” John Kelly

In Nebraska, winter forces a certain amount of patience (and simultaneously impatience) on us. If the vegetable gardener’s hope and desire is for that first tomato, the flower-lovers among us wait as anxiously for the first blossoms. And one of the quickest, easiest and longest-lasting routes to early color is to plant spring-flowering trees and shrubs.

It’s hard to think of a garden with no trees. Frank Church says “In the intimate and humanized landscape, trees become the greatest single element linking us visually and emotionally with our surroundings. Other manifestations of nature—great rocks, deserts, moors, torrents, hurricanes—stir us, fill us with awe, make us afraid or humble, but a tree we understand and can allow to become part of us. It’s no wonder that when

we first think of a garden we think of a tree.”

To a large extent trees can determine the climate of the yard, certainly the microclimate of the area directly around them. They provide shade and protection from wind, they act as walls and ceilings to enclose outdoor “rooms.” They provide interest of many kinds, appealing to all the senses by their fragrance, fruit, texture, even sound. Perhaps best of all, they are constantly changing. From buds to foliage to bark, they’re a continuously visible but changing part of the landscape.

We use them to frame some views, block out others. More often than not, the trees themselves are the focal point—whether they’re being seen from the yard or from inside the house. Wildlife depend on them for food and shelter and add further interest.

Our desires for maximum efficiency make us think in terms of seasonal interest, wanting “returns” for as much of the year as possible. And in fact, spring-flowering trees are rarely one-stop shows. Their blossoms often give way to fruit or colorful foliage later in the year, and many of them also have unusual and attractive bark.

Most spring-flowering trees are good understory trees, thriving



Saucer magnolia, *Magnolia x soulangiana*

COVER: Redbud, *Cercis canadensis*

in the protection of the canopy provided by larger trees. The pale colors of their blossoms can be especially noticeable in the foreground of large evergreens. And the mulched area under these small trees can be a good place to plant spring bulbs.

For a brief overview of spring-flowering trees, the chart at the end of this issue lists other things you may want to consider in selecting trees for your landscape: size, bloom time, color and exposure.

In the meantime, look out at your landscape and imagine what it might look like in future springs if you planted...

## Redbud

Eastern redbud, *Cercis canadensis*, is a good landscape selection, doing well on its own, under the canopy of larger trees or in a grouping of small trees. It provides some of the earliest blossoms, opening its purplish pink flowers in late March or April. The cultivars 'Alba' and 'Royal White' have white flowers.

Since they bloom so early, redbud's flowers almost seem to emerge from the bark. And even 4-year-old trees can produce blossoms. Redbuds have an extensive range and not all strains are cold-tolerant, so if you're planning to buy one, check to make sure it was grown from a hardy seed source.

## Magnolia

Two of the magnolia species adapted to Nebraska are saucer magnolia, *Magnolia x soulangiana* and Loebner magnolia, *Magnolia x loebneri*.

Choosing the right site is critical for magnolias. The temptation is to place them in a protected location, but if it's a warm south location, they may bloom earlier than usual and be even more susceptible to a spring freeze. Dr. Michael Dirr, an authority on woody landscape plants, writes that, for *Magnolia soulangiana*, "1(2) out of every 3 or 4 years would be

a conservative estimate for almost total flower loss in many areas." Writing this on a February day with a temperature of 60°, those odds don't sound at all pessimistic. Still, the blossoms they produce are worth some risk.

## Hawthorn

The hawthorns are widely used in landscape plans, often to provide horizontal lines and human scale to large buildings. They provide excellent year-round interest—spring flowers, glossy green summer foliage, beautiful fall color and fruit that persists through winter. And they can tolerate hot, dry conditions. These attributes are balanced by the fact that hawthorns can be susceptible to many diseases and insects: fireblight, leaf blight, rusts, mildews, aphids, borers, miners, mites, etc.

The blossoms of *Crataegus x mordenensis* open in May and its deep red fruits ripen in September and persist into late fall. Cockspur and Washington hawthorn, *Crataegus crusgallii* and *C. phaenopyrum*, have 2" thorns, making them a questionable choice for high-traffic or play areas, but there are thornless varieties available. The fruits of green hawthorn, *Crataegus viridis*, are a deep red and often remain through winter; and this cultivar is somewhat less susceptible to rust than other hawthorns.

## Crabapple

There are endless varieties of flowering crabapples, and in full flower, few flowering trees can compete with them. But like the hawthorns, they are susceptible to a number of diseases. In western Nebraska, fire blight is the predominant disease. It can eventually kill the trees, unlike scab and cedar-apple rust, in the central and eastern parts of the state, which typically damages only the appearance.

Don Steinegger, UNL horticulturist, recommends planting

disease-resistant varieties but warns that disease-resistance is not a permanent characteristic since the fungi and bacteria they are susceptible to are continually changing. Some of the cultivars he recommends are: 'Zumi Calocarpa' for flower display and abundant tiny red fruit; 'Molten Lava' and 'Red Jade' for horizontal branching habit; 'Professor Sprenger' for persistent fruit; and 'Dolgo' for harvesting the fruit.

Since there are so many varieties with such varied periods of blooming, it is possible to plant trees that can extend flowering time from April all the way through July. There are also some varieties that hold their fruit well into the winter, adding winter color and providing food for birds.

The two crabapple varieties gardening columnist Lauren Springer chose for her yard, 'Ormiston Roy' and 'Adams', produce fruit that persists long into the winter but she believes "that has more to do with the local birds' palate than with climate or the tree's physiological state." (She also gives some credit to the close supervision of her nine cats.) One of the crabapples at UNL's East Campus, Malus 'Donald Wyman' was still holding fruit early in February.

## Serviceberry

Serviceberry, *Amelanchier x grandiflora*, also known as Juneberry, straddles the line between a small tree and large shrub. Regardless, its white blossoms, attractive fruit and good fall color make this an outstanding landscape plant, resulting in its selection by members of the Nebraska Nursery and Landscape Association as the 1998 "Tree of the Year." The cultivars 'Autumn Brilliance' and 'Robin Hill' are recommended.

## Dogwood

While the well-known flowering dogwood (*Cornus florida*) of the southern United States is marginally hardy in Nebraska, several other beautiful dogwoods can be

successfully grown. An example is Pagoda dogwood, *Cornus alternifolia*. Its yellowish white flowers open in May or early June. It prefers partially shaded locations and moist, acid, well-drained soil. As in the selection of cold-resistant redbuds, it's best to find a northern seed source, if possible. Its branches, which open out in tiers, create very strong, horizontal lines. It has been chosen as Nebraska's "Tree of the Year" for 2000.

*Cornus kousa* is somewhat better adapted to our soils than *Cornus florida*, but it still prefers moist, acid, well-drained conditions. *Cornus mas* can tolerate acidic soils, high pH or even clay soils. Its yellow flowers open in March, often before anything else. 'Golden Glory' is a cultivar that has reliably produced an abundance of flowers. Dirr says it is "the longest lived of all *Cornus* species" in the Midwest.

## Lilac

Lilacs are synonymous with spring in Nebraska. While the most familiar lilacs are shrubs, one tree-like species also deserves a place in the landscape. The blossoms of the Japanese tree lilac, *Syringa reticulata*, are creamy white and are produced in large clusters in June. It is extremely adaptable to difficult sites and also resistant to mildew, scale and borers. Dirr says it is one of the toughest and "possibly the most trouble-free lilac." He recommends 'Ivory Silk', 'Regent' and 'Summer Snow'.

## Viburnum

The viburnums are also known mainly as shrubs, but have several species that take on tree-like proportions. "A garden without a viburnum is akin to life without music and art" is Dirr's introduction to this family of shrubs. Some of the notable taller species are nannyberry and blackhaw viburnum, *Viburnum lentago* and *v. prunifolium*. The 1" long buds of the nannyberry viburnum



Serviceberry, *Amelanchier canadensis*

open to 3-4 ½” white inflorescences in May. This shrub/small tree can grow to a 30’ height with a variable spread. It is susceptible to mildew and so even though it grows well in shade, it should be planted where there is good air movement around it.

Blackhaw viburnum has similar blossoms, grows to a 20’ height and is less susceptible to rust. Both have purplish red fall foliage.

## Others to Try

Fringetrees will survive in almost any landscape setting. White fringetree, *Chionanthus virginicus*, an American native, bears small white “clouds of bloom” in the spring. Chinese fringetree, *Chionanthus retusus*, blooms slightly later in spring, has smaller blossoms of a purer white, and its leaves are shinier and more leathery. Michael Dirr says he would “like to make a case for this as the national shrub for even dogwood does not carry itself with such refinement, dignity and class when in flower.”

Yellowhorn, *Xanthoceras sorbifolium*, is similar to fringetree but is not widely used. Like fringetree, it has white and yellow clusters of flowers in late spring and tolerates a wide variety of soils. Yellowhorn, however, requires full sun.

Dirr believes American smoketree, *Cotinus obovatus*, “may be the best of all American shrub trees for intensity of color.” The yellow flowers it produces in June are followed by a much more dramatic show as the dense hairs on the flower clusters go through several color changes, eventually turning a smoky pink beginning in June and continuing into August. The foliage goes from blue-green in spring to magnificent yellow, orange, and deep purplish red in the fall, sometimes with all colors present at the same time.

Shantung maple, *Acer truncatum*, also has excellent fall color, turning yellow-orange and red in the fall. Its bright yellow flowers appear in April before the foliage is visible.

It is tolerant of almost any of the difficulties associated with street plantings, i.e. poor soil, heat and drought.

Amur maackia, *Maackia amurensis*, is valued not so much for its flowers as for its beautiful amber-colored bark. It is a very hardy tree and is good for lawn and patio use. New foliage is grayish, giving way to a dark green and bearing white blossoms in June or July. It is plagued by few diseases or pests, and even does well in planters.

European birdcherry, *Prunus padus*, which can grow to 30-40’, bears white blossoms in early May. ‘Plena’s’ flowers are large and double, and last longer than those of most cultivars. *Prunus sargentii* is slightly smaller, 20-30’ high, with pink blossoms in early May and shiny, dark green foliage in summer that turns bronze-red in the fall. The blossoms of *Prunus virginiana*, common chokecherry, open in late April.

## “Now!”

If you simply can’t wait any longer, you can force branches of any of the trees mentioned in this issue. Choose branches with lots of plump flower buds, cutting 6-18” branches just above a side bud so you don’t leave a stub. If temperatures are below freezing, submerge them overnight in room temperature water. Cutting a 2” vertical slit in the bottom of the stem helps them absorb water, which should be changed every few days. Place them in a cool, humid room out of direct sunlight. It will take 1-8 weeks, depending on how far along the buds were.

But hopefully by the time you read this, the “march of buds” Karel Capek writes about in *The Gardener’s Year* will have begun, starting with the forsythias while “the other bushes and trees are still waiting for some imperative ‘Now!’ which will breathe from the earth or from the sky; in that moment all buds will open, and it will be here.”



Cornelian cherry dogwood, *Cornus mas*



White fringetree, *Chionanthus virginicus*

## Recommended Reading

- Michael Dirr, *Dirr’s Hardy Trees and Shrubs and Manual of Woody Landscape Plants*
- Justin Evertson, *Guide to Woody Plants for Nebraska*
- Joseph Hudak, *Trees for Every Purpose*
- John Kelly, *The Hillier Gardener’s Guide to Trees and Shrubs*
- Rachel Snyder, *Gardening in the Heartland*
- Lauren Springer, *The Undaunted Garden*
- Don Steinegger and John Watkins, *Crabapples for Nebraska Landscapes (NebGuide G97-1326-A)*
- Kim Tripp and J. C. Raulston, *The Year in Trees*

# Spring-flowering Trees

| <b>Tree</b>               | <b>Common name</b>      | <b>Height</b> | <b>Spread</b> | <b>Blossoms</b>             | <b>Sun*</b> |
|---------------------------|-------------------------|---------------|---------------|-----------------------------|-------------|
| Acer truncatum            | Shantung maple          | 20-25'        | 20-25'        | yellow, April               | full sun    |
| Amelanchier x grandiflora | serviceberry            | 20-25'        | 20-25'        | white, April                |             |
| Cercis canadensis         | Eastern redbud          | 20-25'        | 25-35'        | purplish pink, early spring |             |
| Chionanthus virginicus    | white fringetree        | 12-25'        | 12-25'        | white, May-June             | full sun    |
| Chionanthus retusus       | Chinese fringetree      | 15-20'        | 15-30'        | white, May-June             | full sun    |
| Cornus alternifolia       | Pagoda dogwood          | 15-25'        | 20-30'        | yellowish white, May-June   |             |
| Cornus kousa              | Kousa dogwood           | 20-30'        | 15-20'        | greenish yellow, May        |             |
| Cornus mas                | Corneliancherry dogwood | 20-25'        | 15-20'        | yellowish, May              |             |
| Cotinus obovatus          | American smoketree      | 20-30'        | 15-25'        | yellowish, June             |             |
| Crataegus spp.            | hawthorn                | 20-35'        | 15-20'        | white, May                  | full sun    |
| Maackia amurensis         | Amur maackia            | 20-35'        | 15-20'        | white, June-July            |             |
| Magnolia x loebneri       | Loebner magnolia        | 20-30'        | 15-20'        | white to pink, April        |             |
| Magnolia x soulangiana    | saucer magnolia         | 20-30'        | 20-30'        | white to pink, April        |             |
| Malus spp.                | flowering crabapple     | 15-25'        | 15-20'        | white and pink, May         |             |
| Prunus padus              | European birdcherry     | 30-40'        | 15-20'        | white, May                  | full sun    |
| Prunus virginiana         | common chokecherry      | 20-30'        | 18-25'        | white, April-May            | full sun    |
| Syringa reticulata        | Japanese tree lilac     | 20-30'        | 15-25'        | white, June                 |             |
| Viburnum lentago          | nannyberry viburnum     | 15-30'        | 10-15'        | white, May                  |             |
| Viburnum prunifolium      | blackhaw viburnum       | 15-30'        | 10-15'        | white, May                  |             |
| Xanthoceras sorbifolium   | shinyleaf yellowhorn    | 18-20'        | 20-25'        | white, May                  | full sun    |

\* Will grow in partial shade unless otherwise indicated.