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Native Trees for Urban Gardens

Center for Urban Resilience

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NATIVE TREES for URBAN GARDENS

Theodore Payne Foundation for Wild Flowers & Native Plants

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Garden-making often starts with a tree – a little sapling that will, in time, provide color, fragrance, shade and places for birds to nest and twitter. Much to the gardener's delight, California's flora offers a wealth of trees. Though each is unique in character, all provide seasonal interest and habitat for native wildlife.

Selecting the right species is crucial, as trees are the long-lived heart of a landscape and determine the nature of a garden. Start by assessing your personal needs, garden conditions and available space. Choose wisely: Big fast-growing trees need plenty of shoulder and head room. Smaller species will fit in tight spaces; some will even grow in containers. To learn more, visit our California Native Plant Database at theodorepayne.org.

LARGE TREES

Calocedrus decurrens (incense cedar) – 70-90' H x 10-15' W – A handsome evergreen conifer with flattened sprays of fragrant foliage and furrowed, shredding orange-brown bark. Moderate growth rate; pyramidal shape. Tolerates poor soils and smog; resistant to heat, drought and oak root fungus.

Platanus racemosa (Western sycamore) – 30-80' H x 30' W – This riparian beauty appreciates yearround irrigation and grows quickly with great leaning trunks, spreading crown of humongous leaves, and flaking silver and brown bark. Tolerates heat and wind; resistant to oak root fungus. Winter deciduous, picturesque and gorgeous in all seasons!

Quercus agrifolia (coast live oak) – 25-75' H x 30-60' W – This regional icon grows at a moderate pace large, dome-shaped crown of evergreen holly-like foliage. Heat-loving and very drought tolerant, once established.

Q. engelmannii (Engelmann, mesa or Pasadena oak) – 40' H x 40' W – A natural for valley and foothills residents that grows slowly with rounded canopy of long, rounded, dull blue-green foliage and furrowed gray brown bark. Tolerates heat and drought. Old leaves are shed as new leaves emerge in spring.

Q. lobata (valley oak) – 30-90' H x 30+' W – This mighty species, said to be America's largest oak, sports pale gray bark and elegantly lobed dark green foliage. Prefers hot inland conditions and deep rich soil; tolerates drought and alkalinity; resistant to oak root fungus. Winter deciduous.

Pinus ponderosa (ponderosa pine) – 40-70' H x 20-40' W – This tall narrow species grows at a moderate pace with glossy green needles and orange-brown bark. Long-lived and adaptable to heat, moderate drought and all but desert conditions.

P. torreyana (Torrey pine) – 35-50' H x 20-40' W – Our nation's rarest pine hails from restricted areas of coastal San Diego and a small section of Santa Rosa Island. In cultivation, fast upright growth with a broad open crown of long blue-green needles. Adapts to most soils and climates; resistant to heat, smog, drought and oak root fungus.

Umbellularia californica (California bay) – 75' H x 60 W – In cultivation, this species grows slowly at first, then more quickly. Dense evergreen foliage and smooth gray bark. Very aromatic leaves may be substituted for sweet bay laurel in cooking. Thrives with good drainage and regular irrigation but tolerates heat and drought.

(over)

SMALL TO MEDIUM-SIZE TREES

Brahea armata (Mexican blue palm) – 25-40' H x 8'+ wide – A Baja California native with chalky silverblue leaves and arching masses of creamy white flowers. Slow-growing. Tolerates heat and wind; thrives in coastal, inland and desert locations. Excellent container plant.

Parkinsonia floridum (blue palo verde) – 20-30' H x 20' W – This popular desert species offers abundant, fragrant, yellow spring flowers, plus blue-green leaflets, thorny limbs and blue-green bark. Single or multi-trunked trees grow quickly. Good drainage preferred; requires periodic deep watering; drought deciduous.

Ceanothus arboreus (felt-leaf or Catalina ceanothus) – 15-25' H x 12' W – A fast-growing Channel Islands native with beautiful evergreen foliage (dull green on top, white on the underside) and late winter/early spring clusters of small, honey-scented pale blue to white flowers. Tolerates clay soil; drought tolerant to moderate irrigation.

Cercis occidentalis (Western redbud) – 15' H x 10' W – This charmer is usually grown as a multi-trunk specimen. Brilliant pink, pea-like, early spring blossoms on leafless gray branches are followed by heartshaped leaves and red-purple seedpods. Sun- and drought-tolerant, but best with light shade and monthly irrigation when grown inland. Accepts most soils; resistant to oak root fungus. Flowers most heavily where winter temperatures drop below 28°F.

Chilopsis linearis (desert willow) – 15-20' W x 10' W – A hummingbird magnet that sports graceful, arching branches of willow-like foliage, with summer displays of trumpet-shaped flowers in shades of white, pink, rose or purple with darker markings. Moderate growth rate; prune when young for good form. Winter deciduous; accepts sun, heat and drought.

Fraxinus dipetala (California or flowering ash) – 15' H x 10' W – Diminutive and too rarely planted! Slow to moderate growth with multiple trunks, gray bark, dark green compound leaves and showy clusters of small, fragrant white flowers that appear before leaves in April. Yellow, coppery or purplish fall color precedes winter leaf drop. Drought-tolerant, once established.

Juglans californica* var. *californica (Southern California black walnut) – 30' H x 10-15' W – This local species, now rare in nature, tolerates heat, smog and drought, while providing nesting, cover, nectar and food for wildlife. Slow growing. Winter deciduous; warm yellow fall color. Great on slopes; tolerates heat, smog and drought; resistant to oak root fungus.

Lyonothamnus floribundus* ssp. *aspleniifolius (Santa Cruz Island ironwood) – 30'+ H x 15-20 W – This Channel Island native bears large clusters of tiny white flowers in summer, aging to orange-rust. Narrow evergreen leaves are glossy, deep green and lobed along the edges. Reddish gray bark peels in thin shreds. Fast growth and upright habit. Tolerates wind, salt spray and drought. Beautiful when planted in groves.

Pinus monophylla (single-leaf piñon pine) – 25-30' H x 25-30' W – Forms a rounded crown of short, stiff pale gray-green needles and red-brown cones with delicious, nutritious pine nuts. Naturally suited to hot dry conditions. Very slow grower; a fine choice for container culture.

Quercus douglasii (blue oak) – 15-30 H x 15-30 W – A lovely oak for relatively small spaces! Pale gray bark. Lobed leaves are blue-green with pale undersides and take on pastel pink or yellow hues before dropping for the winter. Accepts extreme heat and seasonal drought.