

# Small Trees for Desert Gardens

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Trees are usually the largest and most important components of a landscape, so getting the “right trees for the right places” is essential for a design that will function well and look good. This might seem obvious, but poor tree choices are common and it’s not hard to find evidence like “truck-pruned” street trees, mangled plantings under utility wires, and topped trees near billboards. These problems are usually the result of putting BIG trees where SMALL trees would have been better.

Below are descriptions of small trees from the western US and northern Mexico that grow well in the desert areas of southern Arizona. “Small” trees are ones that normally grow to 20 feet tall or less and/or shrubs that can be pruned to have single or multiple trunks and a raised canopy. The trees are generally low or moderate water users and tolerate the heat and cold of this area. Most of them are readily available in nurseries and are easy to maintain. Please note that some trees will do well only in warmer microclimates and that some can exceed 20 feet tall in favorable conditions with high water applications.



## ***Acacia berlandieri* “Guajillo”**

This Texas tree is ferny and lacy, lending a soft, tropical feel to a landscape. It is drought and frost tolerant, grows fairly quickly and is mostly thornless. By nature it is a shrub, but it can be pruned into a tree and is easily maintained that way. In mild climates it is nearly evergreen and reaches 15 feet in height. It is attractive in flower, easy to care for, and makes an ideal patio or oasis zone tree.

## ***Acacia constricta* “Whitethorn acacia” (Sonoran Desert Native)**

Whitethorn is widespread in the southwestern US. It is a tough shrub that can be pruned into a multi-trunked tree. It has small compound leaves (which drop in winter) and fragrant yellow flowers in summer. It tolerates poor soils, drought, and cold. Its character is rather like a mini-Velvet mesquite. Because of its thorns, it should not be used in high traffic areas and because it is deciduous for a long time, it should be mixed with evergreen plant species.

## ***Acacia greggii* “Catclaw acacia” (Sonoran Desert Native)**

Catclaw is generally a shrub to 15 feet tall but occasionally grows larger. It can be pruned into an attractive single or multi-trunked tree. It is exceedingly thorny and hard to prune, but it is very drought and cold tolerant and is long-lived. Fragrant cream colored flowers cover the tree in April-May. Catclaw is ideal for landscapes without irrigation but should be planted away from traffic areas because of its thorns.

### ***Acacia rigidula* “Blackbrush”**

Blackbrush grows slowly to 15 feet tall and is long-lived. It is a Texas native with dark green foliage that resembles that of Texas ebony (*Ebenopsis ebano*). It is rangy when young, but develops a thicker canopy with age. Blackbrush tolerates drought and frost but will lose its leaves in very cold winters.

### ***Acacia schaffneri* “Twisted acacia”**

The leaves of Twisted acacia grow closely along its branches and create a sculptural effect. It is a drought and cold tolerant species that can be evergreen but is deciduous in cold winters. With its strange growth habit and bright yellow flowers, Twisted acacia makes a great specimen tree.

### ***Acacia willardiana* “Palo blanco” (Sonoran Desert Native)**

This might be the best small tree for planting close to structures because it is slow growing and never develops large lateral branches. The bark is smooth and white and the foliage is sparse and pendulous. A stunning effect can be had by grouping Palo blancos like birches are planted in the Midwest. They are dramatic when lit up at night. It is only for warm microclimates and can be damaged by temperatures below the mid-20s.

### ***Bauhinia lunarioides (congesta)* “Anacacho orchid tree”**

This thornless small tree has butterfly shaped leaves and showy white or pink flowers. It is an ideal patio tree that is evergreen in warm winters or microclimates. It is clean and attractive and requires little maintenance. It is cold tolerant but only moderately drought tolerant and grows best with supplemental water in summer.

### ***Caesalpinia cacalaco* “Casalote”**

Casalote puts on a tremendous bloom of yellow flowers in fall and winter. In fact, it is one of the few winter blooming trees in the desert southwest. It grows to 15 feet tall and can be pruned into a multi-trunked tree. Its stout and numerous thorns add interest but preclude its use in high traffic areas. Casalote is damaged by temperatures below 20 degrees and can be defoliated by psyllids in the spring. It recovers quickly from such damage, however.

### ***Celtis ehrenbergia (pallida)* “Desert hackberry” (Sonoran Desert Native)**

This hackberry is a thorny evergreen shrub with zigzag branches. It can be pruned into a tree (wear goggles and gloves!) and is well suited for tough background locations. It is an excellent bird tree that provides cover, nesting sites, and edible fruits. It is very drought and cold tolerant.

### ***Cordia boissieri* “Texas olive”**

Texas olive is one of the most attractive trees for planting in the Southwest. Large evergreen leaves and long-blooming white flowers make it a stunning landscape tree. Some sources call it fast growing, others slow. In any case, it is worth the wait for it to reach its mature height of 15 feet. Watering every couple of weeks in summer will enhance its bloom. In cold winters it can look a bit ragged and in fall the fruits can be a bit of a mess on sidewalks or patios. However, its bad points are easily overcome by its great character and flowers.

### ***Dodonaea viscosa* “Hopbush” (Sonoran Desert Native)**

Hopbush is common in southwestern landscapes but is not often pruned to tree shape. The broad leafed variety from Mexico is the best choice for pruning up and makes a nice mini-tree for a patio or other small space. It is tough and low maintenance. Female plants produce attractive papery fruits.

***Ebenopsis ebano* (*Pithecellobium flexicaule*) “Texas ebony”**

This (mostly) evergreen tree has glossy dark foliage that lends a tropical effect to a garden. It is very thorny and difficult to maintain when small but eventually grows beyond the need for pruning and is worth all the scratches it caused. Texas ebony is certainly one of the most beautiful trees for southwest landscapes. It even looks good bare with interesting gray bark and zigzag branches. It can exceed 20 feet tall in very favorable and warm conditions.

***Eysenhardtia orthocarpa* “Kidneywood” (Sonoran Desert Native)**

Kidneywood grows upright and reaches 15 feet tall. It is a deciduous tree with shaggy tan bark and fragrant white flowers. It is easy to maintain, thornless, and quite clean because its leaflets and seeds are small and don't create much litter. Kidneywood is a native of southern Arizona and is the host for at least one butterfly species.

***Fraxinus greggii* “Little leaf ash” (Sonoran Desert Native)**

This small ash tree grows slowly and is easily pruned into a multi-trunked tree. It is evergreen and thornless. It tolerates cold but performs best in the low desert with supplemented water. Little leaf ash is good for oasis zone plantings where its deep green foliage provides a lush, cool effect.

***Haematoxylum brasiletto* “Brazilwood” (Sonoran Desert Native)**

Brazilwood is a stunning specimen tree for areas with warm microclimates. It has fluted trunks, beautiful yellow flowers, and attractive foliage. It is drought deciduous and can sustain severe damage in temperatures below 20 degrees.

***Havardia pallens* (*Pithecellobium pallens*) “Tenaza”**

Tenaza is an upright, thorny, and ferny leafed tree that grows quickly and makes a great street or median tree. Its fuzzy flowers attract myriad insects and are pleasantly fragrant. It is generally evergreen and tolerates temperatures to the low 20s. Tenaza deserves wider use in desert landscapes.

***Lysiloma watsoni* “Desert fern tree” (Sonoran Desert Native)**

This tree can be found growing wild in the Rincon Mountains near Tucson. As its name suggests, it has ferny foliage and is soft and lush in a garden. It prefers sites that don't get heavy frosts—in the low 20s it can be damaged. It grows at a slow to moderate rate but is easy to care for and worth the wait.

***Morus microphylla* “Texas mulberry” (Sonoran Desert Native)**

This tree is native to the southwest of the US at mid-elevations and in riparian areas. It makes a nice oasis zone tree with variable broad leaves and small, but delicious, red fruits on female trees. Male trees produce pollen which is probably as allergenic as that of other *Morus* species and should be avoided. It is deciduous.

***Parkinsonia microphylla* (*Cercidium microphyllum*) “Foothills palo verde” (Sonoran Desert Native)**

This tree is common in southern Arizona. It has green bark and multiple trunks from near the base. Masses of pastel yellow flowers appear in late spring. This is a good tree to buy boxed because of its slow growth rate. It tolerates heavy poor soils. Naturally occurring specimens are intolerant of irrigation or heavy pruning.

***Parkinsonia x “Desert Museum” “Desert Museum palo verde” (Sonoran Desert Native)***

This naturally occurring hybrid is a remarkably fast growing tree that combines the good qualities of Mexican palo verde with those of its relatives. It blooms heavily for almost two months and its yellow and orange flowers contrast nicely with the lime green bark and foliage. It can reach 20 feet tall in just a few years. It is attractive, thornless, and has an upright habit. These characteristics make it an excellent tree for patios and areas where it can be appreciated up close. Note: With ample water it exceeds 20 feet tall and is prone to weak growth and splitting.

***Prosopis pubescens* “Screwbean mesquite” (Sonoran Desert Native)**

This small mesquite has an open canopy with clusters of pods that look like coiled springs and hang like ornaments. It is deciduous and has a light canopy that casts little shade. It is a good overstory tree for growing cacti and succulents.

***Psoralea argophylla* (*Dalea spinosa*) “Smokebush” (Sonoran Desert Native)**

Smokebush is generally leafless and twiggy but interesting for its smoky gray color and blue flowers which bloom in June and July. It grows naturally in sandy soils in the hottest areas of the southwest. Despite the low rainfall of its native habitat, it responds well to supplemental watering in summer and will grow quickly. The foliage and stems are aromatic.

***Sapindus drummondii* “Western soapberry” (Sonoran Desert Native)**

This Arizona native is a small tree that spreads by root suckers. It can exceed 20 feet tall in riparian areas but is usually smaller. It has attractive foliage that turns brilliant yellow in fall and has strange fruits that look like translucent plastic and contain a single black seed. The seed covering can be soaked in water to produce a soapy liquid—thus the common name. It often forms small copses from root suckers.

***Sophora secundiflora* “Texas mountain laurel”**

Texas mountain laurel is usually a shrub, but it can be trained into an attractive tree with little effort and lots of time. It has glossy evergreen leaves and purple flowers that smell like grape “Kool-Aid” and attract big black carpenter bees. It is drought and cold tolerant but suffers damage from caterpillars some springs. The leaves are replaced quickly, but if the flower buds get eaten, there is no spring show. The seeds of Texas mountain laurel are poisonous but are so hard they present little real risk.

***Ungnadia speciosa* “Mexican buckeye”**

Fragrant pink flowers cover this tree in spring before the leaves appear. It rivals Redbud in showiness. Interesting three-part pods contain black seeds and hang on the tree through winter. It requires training to form a small tree.

***Vauquelinia californica* “Arizona rosewood” (Sonoran Desert Native)**

Rosewood is usually a shrub in nature, but will grow into an dense upright tree to 20 feet tall. Stiff evergreen leaves resemble oleander but are saw-toothed. Clusters of white flowers appear in spring. Rosewood is tough and slow growing.

## References

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