

**Understory trees:** "Tree crown greater than 6 meters (20 ft.) but less than 15 meters (50 ft.) in height at maturity."

Hmm. I didn't know that. I had a different understanding of the category of understory trees: Trees that live happily under the canopy and shade of larger trees. The are both right. One suggests a scale or size and one describes that scale in a specific size (shade). I will focus primarily on my definition and include some shrubs that are tree-like in form or scale.

Look around Memphis. Notice. Which landscapes are the most pleasing? Well, that differs from person to person, but I suggest that those which include a variety of scale are most interesting. I have noticed pockets of neighborhoods that are embraced by landscapes. Sometimes the whole street. Memphians are blessed (and cursed) with large trees that embrace the whole city. Stand on top of the Peabody and what do you see? Trees. Literally for miles. Drive down Germantown Parkway and what do you see? Sun, pavement and storefronts. (This will change with time, one hopes.) Which FEELS better?

Now get off the main roads and look around in older and often affluent or formerly affluent neighborhoods. Often you will see landscape with large trees, yes, that suddenly drops down to ground zero, to dwarf and ground covers. Neat, tidy, functional and certainly not bad, but I feel lacking romance. Now imagine a Memphis without dogwoods, redbuds, Japanese maples, or tulip magnolias. i.e., understory trees. We know about the, we like them, perhaps, we only peripherally notice them. They are like veils in the garden connecting earth to sky and turf to oak.

My favorite gardens have random, informal "hedges" of these characters with occasional views opening from the street to the house, suggesting that one would wish they could gain entry to what must be a fascinating garden within. Illusion. Understory trees move the landscape from the horizontal plane to include the vertical and the house looks less like a pancake under trees. Which would you rather have, a pancake or a six layer cake with alternating fillings...chocolate and raspberry and creme, perhaps?

So you understand and are familiar with understory trees. Let's just broaden the list of choices and use a few more on the edges, in the lawn and obscuring the house.

**Dogwood.** We all know and love them. Use more of them. Buy 5 or 6 this fall and plant them where your lawn won't grow. They are drought tolerant but water and manure accelerate their growth. Don't plant where water stands after rain. *Comus florida*, the American native. Wonderful layered branching. Many selections available for color and bigger flowers. *Comus kousa*, from Japan. More horizontal in form, adding another dimension. Blooms larger than *C. florida*, extending the seasons. Fall color.

**Redbud.** *Cercis canadensis*. You know 'em. Sun or shade. Try "Forest Pansy" for early purple foliage or *C. canadensis alba* for white flowers. Fall color.

**Japanese Maple.** *Acer palmatum*. What an unusual family. Cost can be prohibitive, but tree forms are generally affordable. Really a must have. More than one. For all summer red leaves, get "Bloodgood"; for green leaves with coral bark try "Senkaki" or "Coral Bark Maple." If you are fascinated by peeling bark there is *A. griseum* or "Paper Bark Maple." I am currently interested in the "Full Moon Maple." *A. japonicum aconitifolium var. aureum.*, having larger yellow leaves all summer. Fall color? Oh, yes.



**Amelanchier.** *Amelanchier arborea*. *A. laevis*, *A. alnifolia*, *A. canadensis*. Graceful arching tree, white flowers, fragrant, edible berries (like blueberries), great fall color. Selections available for size, color and fruit.

**Tulip magnolia.** *Magnolia soulangeana*, *M. denudata* and *M. stellata*. These are deciduous magnolias blooming before the foliage in early

spring. Sizes range from 30-40 and 10 ft. respectively. Slow. To avoid early frosts try later blooming varieties, "Ann," Betty," "Jane," or "Ballerina," "Spring snow" and "Leonard Messil." Tulip forms and star forms. *M. denudata* is a very large pure white tulip form magnolia. Absolutely stunning. Subject to early frosts, but please plant one. Most are fragrant.

**American Fringe Tree.** *Chionanthus virginicus*. Don't wait, get 3 or 4. Wide spreading, 25 ft. height. White fragrant fleecy flowers. Reminds of a white forsythia tree. Fragrant. For full sun spaces try *C. retusus* or "**Chinese Fringe Tree.**" Lustrous foliage, intense flowering, interesting bark. Fragrant.



**Deciduous Holly.** *Ilex decidua* or *I. verticillata*. Multistemmed arching tree. Red berries and leafless in winter. Stunning. Sun or shade. To avoid disappointment with berries, plant a large female and a small male in the same hole. *I. decidua* grow to 15 ft. Cultivars include "Warrens Red" and "Councils Fire." *I. verticillata* grows 6-10 ft. Cultivars include "Sparkleberry," "Winter Red," and many more. WINTER COLOR!



**Styrax.** *Styrax japonicus*, *S. american* and *S. ovasia*. 25 ft., 10 ft., and 30 ft. in order. Graceful. White fragrance pendulous stalks of flowers emerge from leaved branches in 2-6 in. lengths in April or May. Forms, size and flower length differ by species. Excellent next to patio for viewing and fragrance.

**Bottlebrush Buckeye.** *Aesculus parviflora*. 15 ft. tall and 8 ft. wide shrub flowering midsummer. Had to mention it. Tropical foliage 8-12 in. flower clusters vertical, white. Amazing. Fall color? Yes, yes yes.

**Stewartia.** *Stewartia pseudocamelia* *S. malocodendron*, and *S. monadelphica*. The first grows to 30 ft. (slow), the latter to 15 ft. I omitted one of the best till nearly last. Forgive me. Camelia-like single white flowers with yellow or purple stamens 2-3 in. Fragrant summer blooming. Fall color, interesting bark. Gotta have one near the patio or entrance or window. Give it intense morning sun and afternoon shade. *S. monadelphica* is best suited to our region but alas has the smallest flowers.

O.K., I am fading fast here and there is so much more to tell so I will be brief. You need to look up, go see, check out and learn about these other guys.



**Witch hazel.** *Hamamelis x intermedia*. Hybrids 15-20 ft. Fragrant 1-2 in. flowers in winter. Red or yellow. "Arnolds Promise," "Diana," "Jalena." Vertical.

**Sweet bay magnolia.** *Magnolia virginica*. Versatile.

**Sourwood.** *Oxydendrum arboreum*. Yummy.

**Devils Walking Stick.** *Aralia spinosa*. Leaves are alternate, bi-pinnately compound 32-64 in. long. Which means they look like huge feather fans. Grow as a tree or mow down occasionally for a hedge. Great with Big leaf magnolia.

**Hollies.** Pick some great large tree forms, put them under large trees and give them room.

**Southern magnolia.** *Magnolia grandiflora*. This huge monster is delightfully tamed and more graceful in shade. Give him room.

Oh, by the way, did I mention **Sassafras, Yellowwood, PawPaw, Halesia, Black Gum, Musclewood.....**