How do I prune my tree to keep it small? This is a recurring question I hear at my pruning lectures, and my recurring answer is: “You need to plant a small-growing tree to begin with.” Short of doing actual bonsai training, keeping trees substantially smaller than their genetics dictate isn’t usually very successful in the long run. Besides, there are so many options for great small trees, and new dwarf tree cultivars seem to appear in nursery inventories every year.

Tree species and cultivars with heights ranging between 15 and 28 feet tall are generally considered appropriate for growing beneath utility lines. One local grower I know tells me that municipalities are often looking for more options closer to 15 feet tall, which—in terms of size at least—sounds more like a large shrub. (See “Small Trees or Large Shrubs” below.)

And, indeed, many larger shrubs qualify very well as small trees—further increasing the palette of plants we can use. Single-trunk specimens of ninebark (Physocarpos opulifolius) and red-flowering currant (Ribes sanguineum), trained to tree form, are becoming more common in regional nurseries. I’ve seen burning bush euonymus (Euonymus alatus) take on a form and position in older gardens akin to some Japanese maples. Often planted as a dense screening shrub, evergreen Burkwood sweet olive (Osmanthus × burkwoodii) can be very determined to reach its potential as a 20-plus-foot small tree with a broad canopy.
The plant collections at Washington Park Arboretum offer a great opportunity to view the long-term potential of many species, giving gardeners a better idea of which trees might meet their expectations for “staying small”—and which large shrubs might adequately perform the role of a small tree. It is well worth doing this homework before planting trees in size-restricted locations. The pursuit of small-garden trees must also come with some patience, as some of the best small tree species develop at fairly modest growth rates. But believe me, the delayed gratification is truly worth it!

Following is a selection of some of my favorite easy-care small trees for the Northwest garden. Good examples of most of these can be found growing around the Arboretum. Check out the UW Botanic Gardens’ digital map for precise locations: depts.washington.edu/uwbg/gardens/map.shtml.

Mountain hemlock, *Tsuga mertensiana*, is native to subalpine elevations of the Cascade and Olympic mountains but is very adaptable to cultivation at sea level. Its petite size and fine-textured foliage make it an ideal native conifer for smaller gardens. Plant it in lean, well-drained soil to match the preferred conditions in the tree’s native habitat. The species has a relatively narrow habit and, in lowland cultivation, can be expected to reach about 35 feet in height. Beautiful as a single specimen, mountain hemlock also works well in groups as an evergreen backdrop or for screening.

Acer circinatum ‘Monroe’, a lovely selection of our native vine maple, has finely dissected foliage reminiscent of that of a cutleaf Japanese maple. The leaves add interest and texture to the summer garden and offer bold yellow fall color. Recommended for our region by the Miller Garden’s “Great Plant Picks” program (greatplantpicks.org), ‘Monroe’ grows to about 12 feet tall with a broad spread and is generally more compact than the straight species. You’ll find two nice specimens (one dating to 2007, the other to 2013) in the Cascadia Entry Garden in Pacific Connections, right at the beginning of the path leading into Cascadia Forest. Another Arboretum connection is that ‘Monroe’ was originally described in 1974 by former director Brian Mulligan, two years after his retirement; he named it for Dr. Warner Monroe, who discovered the variant in the wilds of the Oregon Cascades in 1960. To grow the tree in your garden, give it woodland edge conditions with light shade and coarse woody mulch.

Spectacular orange to fiery-red fall color is the calling card of American smoke tree, *Cotinus obovatus*. Native to the eastern United States, it is less conspicuous in flower and leaf size than the Eurasian common smoke tree, *Cotinus coggyria*, but—in my opinion—is greatly under-utilized. In terms of growth habit, American smoke tree is truly more tree-like than shrub-like and typically grows to about 20 feet tall with a uniformly rounded crown. In its native range, it is an understory tree found on rocky hills. It will grow best and produce optimal fall color when

LEFT: Mountain hemlock along the east service road, just south of Crabapple Meadow. (Photo by Niall Dunne)  
ABOVE: American smoke tree in fall color, just south of the Graham Visitors Center. (Photo by Niall Dunne)
grown in lean soils with modest moisture levels, and in full sun to partial shade.

Franklin tree, *Franklinia alatamaha* is another eastern United States native tree that is well suited to this region. Named for Benjamin Franklin, the species tree is famous for having disappeared in the wild not long after its discovery in the late 1700s. We have the famous early plant explorer John Bartram to thank for the specimens grown in gardens today. *Franklinia* is closely related to *Camellia* and *Stewartia*, and boasts late-summer blooms that linger to accompany its brilliant-red fall foliage. Another understory denizen, it is best grown where there is high canopy with good morning sun, and in well-drained soil protected by a coarse organic mulch, such as leaf mold or wood chips. *Franklinia* can be delicate to transplant, so pay special attention to proper planting techniques and avoid any drought stress during the first years of establishment.

How about a drought-tolerant tree that can perform well under power lines on urban streets? Or a small tree that will be happy in full sun? Japanese tree lilac, *Syringa reticulata*, grows between 25 and 30 feet tall with a uniform rounded crown. It shines in June with showy, creamy-white flowers that have a strong, sweet fragrance similar to that of privet. The blooms are attractive to hummingbirds and pollinator insects. The cultivar ‘Ivory Silk’ offers even more profuse flowering plus attractive, slightly peeling reddish bark lined with horizontal lenticels.

Crabapples are familiar small trees, but it takes the right disease-resistant cultivar to look decent all summer in the Pacific Northwest. Among the U.S. National Arboretum’s scab-resistant introductions tested at Washington Park Arboretum, *Malus ‘Adirondack’* is one of those right ones. This selection has an upright branch structure and matures at less than 20 feet tall. In spring, copious white flowers open from deep-pink buds. The small, orange-red fruits persist through autumn. Watching the specimen on the east side of the Graham Visitors Center over the past 27 years has reminded me that even a seemingly narrow, short tree can widen considerably with age. ‘Adirondack’ crabapple grows best in full sun and is another good street-tree option.

In the category of woody landscape plants described as “large shrub to small tree,” there are many small trees just waiting for us to recognize them as such. A walk through the older collections in Loderi Valley and Rhododendron Glen at the Arboretum provides an apt reminder of the capacity for many rhododendrons to become trees. A long-time favorite of mine is the...
magnificent open–grown arboreal specimen of *Rhododendron auriculatum* at the bottom of the slope beneath the Arboretum lookout. Planted around 1938, it has now reached nearly 30 feet in height and spread. Native to China, it bears delicately fragrant white blooms from late June into July.

*Red–vein enkianthus*, *Enkianthus campanulatus*; *Japanese andromeda*, *Pieris japonica*; and *strawberry tree*, *Arbutus unedo* are three other species in the heath family (Ericaceae) that merit cultivation as small trees. Most red–vein enkianthus will grow to about 12 feet tall with a somewhat narrow form. With its preference for light shade and reliably stunning fall color, it’s a good replacement for any Japanese maple that may have been eliminated due to verticillium wilt. Evergreen Japanese andromeda will slowly reach 8 to 12 feet tall, with a tree–like form, and the wait is well worth it. The plantings of strawberry tree around the Graham Visitors Center terrace and in the Arboretum’s Mediterranean Collection along Arboretum Drive are testament to this plant being more tree than shrub in structure and height. With the right pruning, strawberry tree can take on a similar (though smaller) character as its relative the Pacific madrone, *Arbutus menziesii*.

Perhaps the smallest “small tree” I’ve seen is a Korean spice viburnum, *Viburnum carlesii*, trained with a single trunk. This deciduous viburnum is generally about 6 to 8 feet tall, and has deliciously fragrant pink–to–white blooms in spring.

*How do I prune my tree to keep it small?* The best way to prune for a small tree is to choose one that won’t need much pruning. Start with a species that matures close to the desired size and prune while it is young for good future structure and form.

There’s a world of great small trees for Pacific Northwest gardens, and I’ve just scratched the surface here...

**Christina Pfeiffer** is a horticulture consultant, educator and ISA Certified Arborist with over 35 years of experience. She is author, with Mary Robson, of “Pacific Northwest Month–by–Month Gardening” (Cool Springs Press, 2017) and also serves on the “Bulletin” Editorial Board.

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**PRUNING SHRUBS FOR TREE FORM**

When establishing new shrubs, consider their future potential for an arboreal or almost arboreal stature. I rue the day when I allowed my new enkianthus to keep the dense clusters of stems they came with in their one-gallon containers. They are now a good 12 feet tall, and I am daunted by the prospect of how to prune effectively the overcrowded trunks. My plants would be much nicer today had they grown up with three rather than seven trunks! A good approach when establishing new shrubs that have tree potential is to prune them for natural form, thin out excess multiple trunks when it can easily be done with hand pruners, and remove lower lateral branches that are within six to eight inches of the ground.

**“SMALL TREES” OR “LARGE SHRUBS”**

In general, a shrub is defined as a woody plant that’s distinguishable from a tree by its multiple stems and smaller height. However, the definition is somewhat arbitrary because some very large trees can have multiple stems, while some single-stemmed trees can be pretty small. Where does a large shrub end and a small tree begin? Opinions vary on this matter. Since ecology textbooks typically define the “shrub layer” of a forest as being between 3 and 15 feet tall, that’s the number I use. Of course, it’s just a rough number. If you’ve seen the towering (25-foot tall), multi-stemmed crape myrtles at the north end of Azalea Way, you’ll know why *Lagerstroemia* are usually qualified as “small trees or large shrubs.”

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FACING PAGE, TOP: Franklin tree at the Arboretum. (Photos by Niall Dunne)
LEFT: Japanese lilac tree. (Photo by Gregory Hohs/Wikimedia Commons)
RIGHT: *Malus ‘Adirondack’* at the Graham Visitors Center. (Photo by Niall Dunne)
THIS PAGE: Korean spice viburnum. (Photo by Christina Pfeiffer)