Community Trees
Low-growing Trees for Urban and Rural Iowa

Introduction
Trees in urban and rural Iowa provide beauty and shade, serve as wind and noise barriers, visual screens, and help reduce airborne pollutants. Unfortunately, trees also can cause personal injury, fires, and power outages when they grow close to power lines. It is estimated electric utility companies across the country spend more than $800 million annually to prune and remove trees growing too close to electrical lines. These costs result in higher utility rates for users.

Fortunately, trees come in a variety of smaller, more compact sizes, giving communities the opportunity to have both trees and uninterrupted utility service. Devoting a little extra time to proper tree species selection and placement in the landscape will pay handsome dividends.

Preventing Problems
When planning a landscape or just adding a tree, citizens first should locate power lines on or near their property. High voltage lines are usually 30 to 35 feet above ground. If overhead lines are located, the best recommendation is to plant nothing beneath them. However, if vegetation is desired, it is imperative to choose low-growing species. Utility companies recommend that vegetation come no closer than 10 feet from their lines. Therefore, trees planted under utility lines should reach a maximum height of 20 to 25 feet at maturity. Trees taller than 25 feet at maturity should be planted far enough away so that branches do not come within 10 feet of power lines. For example, if a prospective tree has a potential height of 35 feet and canopy spread of 40 feet at maturity, it should be planted at least 30 feet from power lines.

Recommended Trees
Choosing the proper tree for a given site will reduce tree/utility line conflicts, limit the need for pruning on a regular basis, and add to the beauty of the landscape. The following list includes low-growing trees that have low maintenance requirements, few pest problems, and wide availability at local nurseries. In addition, several of the selections listed have upright or columnar growth habits and would be perfect for narrow boulevards and planting strips.
Amur maple – *Acer tataricum* subsp. *ginnala*

**Size:** 15 to 20 feet tall with an equal or greater spread  
**Hardiness zone:** 3  
**Growth rate:** Medium  
**Leaf characteristics:** Dark, glossy green summer leaves change to shades of yellow, orange, and red in fall.  
**Remarks:** One of the hardiest maples available. Use single-stem forms for boulevard plantings.  
**Useful cultivars:** ‘Embers’, ‘Flame’, and ‘JFS-UGA’ (Red November™)

Tatarian maple – *Acer tataricum*

**Size:** 15 to 20 feet in height with a comparable spread  
**Hardiness zone:** 3  
**Growth rate:** Slow to medium  
**Leaf characteristics:** Medium to dark green summer leaves usually turn yellow and brown, and occasionally red in fall.  
**Remarks:** Use in planter boxes or along residential streets. Tolerant of alkaline soils.  
**Useful cultivar:** ‘JFS-KW2’ (Rugged Charm™)

Shantung maple (Purpleblow maple) – *Acer truncatum*

**Size:** 20 to 25 feet tall with a comparable spread  
**Hardiness zone:** 4  
**Growth rate:** Slow  
**Leaf characteristics:** Reddish purple when emerging, gradually changing to dark glossy green in summer. Leaves turn lemon yellow to deep maroon in fall.  
**Remarks:** Tree is heat and drought tolerant and resists leaf scorch. Best used in residential areas. Outstanding fall color. May be difficult to find commercially.

Serviceberry or Juneberry – *Amelanchier* spp.

**Size:** 15 to 25 feet in height with variable spread  
**Hardiness zone:** 4  
**Growth rate:** Medium  
**Leaf characteristics:** Dark green summer leaves turn shades of apricot-orange to orange-red in autumn.  
**Flowers:** Pendulous fleecy-white flowers appear in early to mid-April.  
**Remarks:** Avoid using on extremely hot and dry sites. Perfect for woodland borders or naturalized areas in the landscape. The fruit is edible.  
**Useful cultivars:** ‘Autumn Brilliance’, ‘JFS-Arb’ (Spring Flurry®), and ‘Snowcloud’

European hornbeam – *Carpinus betulus*

**Size:** 30 to 40 feet in height with an equal spread  
**Hardiness zone:** 4  
**Growth rate:** Slow to medium  
**Leaf characteristics:** Dark green in summer, changing to yellow in autumn.  
**Remarks:** An excellent tree for screening, hedging, or creating a feeling of formality in the landscape.  
**Useful cultivar:** ‘Fastigiata’

American hornbeam – *Carpinus caroliniana*

**Size:** 20 to 25 feet in height with an equal width  
**Hardiness zone:** 3  
**Growth rate:** Slow  
**Leaf characteristics:** Leaves are dark green in summer, changing to shades of yellow, orange, and scarlet in autumn.  
**Remarks:** Wonderful native tree that performs best when given partial shade.

Pagoda dogwood – *Cornus alternifolia*

**Size:** 15 to 25 feet in height with an equal spread  
**Hardiness zone:** 4  
**Growth rate:** Slow to medium  
**Leaf characteristics:** Medium to dark green leaves turn red-purple to burgundy in fall.  
**Flowers:** Attractive yellow-white flowers adorn the late spring landscape (late May to early June).  
**Remarks:** Excellent native tree with interesting horizontal branching habit. Does not tolerate hot, dry sites.

Cockspur hawthorn – *Crataegus crusgalli*

**Size:** 20 to 30 feet in height with an equal spread  
**Hardiness zone:** 4  
**Growth rate:** Slow to medium  
**Leaf characteristics:** Leaves are lustrous dark green in summer, changing to hues of bronze-red to purple-red in fall.  
**Remarks:** Use as a single specimen or in mass plantings. Also effective as a living fence.
Washington hawthorn – *Crataegus phaenopyrum*
**Size:** 25 to 30 feet tall, spreading 20 to 25 feet
**Hardiness zone:** 4
**Growth rate:** Slow to medium
**Leaf characteristics:** Red-purple when unfolding changing to dark green in summer. Fall color varies from orange to red.
**Remarks:** Very tough tree well suited to street planting; however, thorns may limit its use near pedestrian walkways. Remove the lower branches to avoid this problem. Persistent red fruit brighten the winter landscape.

Winter King hawthorn – *Crataegus viridis* ‘Winter King’
**Size:** 20 to 30 feet tall with comparable spread
**Hardiness zone:** 5
**Growth rate:** Slow to medium
**Leaf characteristics:** Lustrous medium green leaves turn shades of purple and scarlet in fall.
**Remarks:** Attractive red fruit that persist through winter and neat, vase-shaped habit make this an excellent selection. Tree has very few thorns.

Amur maackia – *Maackia amurensis*
**Size:** 20 to 30 feet tall with equal or greater spread
**Hardiness zone:** 3
**Growth rate:** Slow to medium
**Leaf characteristics:** Summer leaves are gray-green to dark green and have no appreciable fall color.
**Flowers:** Interesting white flowers appear in mid to late July.
**Remarks:** An adaptable tree with clean foliage, late season flowers, beautiful bronze bark, and very few insect or disease problems.
**Useful cultivar:** ‘Starburst’

Flowering crabapple – *Malus* spp.
**Size:** Extremely variable; most are between 15 and 25 feet in height
**Hardiness zone:** 4
**Growth rate:** Medium
**Leaf characteristics:** Summer foliage colors range from dark green to maroon. Fall color is usually insignificant.
**Flowers:** Blossoms may be single or double and colors range from white to pink, to red or rose.
**Remarks:** Tough, versatile accent plant best situated in full sun. When choosing crabapples, consider each selection’s growth habit, disease resistance, fruiting characteristics, and flower color.

Flowering plum – *Prunus cerasifera*
**Size:** 20 feet tall and wide
**Hardiness zone:** 4
**Growth rate:** Medium
**Leaf characteristics:** Leaves are dark purple to purple-red throughout the growing season.
**Flowers:** Light pink in early spring.
**Remarks:** Purple leaves and durability make this species very popular; however, the fungus causing black knot disease can be problematic.
**Useful cultivar:** ‘Cripoizam’ (Crimson Pointe®)

Amur chokecherry – *Prunus maackii*
**Size:** 20 to 30 feet tall, spreading 18 to 25 feet
**Hardiness zone:** 3
**Growth rate:** Medium
**Leaf characteristics:** Leaves are medium green in summer with no appreciable fall color.
**Flowers:** White flowers occur in 2- to 3-inch long racemes in early May.
**Remarks:** Golden-brown to copper-colored bark peels off in thin strips as tree matures. Excellent tree for winter interest but this species can be short-lived.
Pekin lilac – *Syringa pekinensis*

Size: 15 to 20 feet tall with comparable spread; usually grown multi-stemmed  
Hardiness zone: 4  
Growth rate: Medium  
Leaf characteristics: Leaves are dark green in summer with no appreciable fall color.  
Flowers: Large, 3- to 6-inch long creamy white flower panicles appear in early June.  
Remarks: Rich, brown, exfoliating bark adds to this tree’s many assets. An excellent accent plant.  
Useful cultivars: ‘Morton’ (China Snow®), ‘SunDak’ (Copper Curls™), and ‘DTR 124’ (Summer Charm®)

Japanese tree lilac – *Syringa reticulata*

Size: 20 to 30 feet tall, spreading 15 to 25 feet  
Hardiness zone: 3  
Growth rate: Medium  
Leaf characteristics: Dark green leaves with no fall color.  
Flowers: Large, fragrant white flowers appear in early June.  
Remarks: Trouble-free small tree. Use as a single specimen or in groups.  
Useful cultivars: ‘Ivory Silk’ and ‘Golden Eclipse’

Blackhaw viburnum – *Viburnum prunifolium*

Size: 12 to 15 feet in height with an equal spread  
Hardiness zone: 4  
Growth rate: Slow to medium  
Leaf characteristics: Dark green summer leaves turn red and purple in fall.  
Flowers: Creamy-white flowers appear in May.  
Remarks: An attractive large shrub that can be easily trained to form a small tree, somewhat reminiscent of a hawthorn at maturity. Effective when used in groups.

Additional Recommendations

Ask your local nursery professional for more information about these additional low-growing trees that are appropriate for most of Iowa:

*Acer triflorum*  
(Three-flowered maple)  
*Cercis canadensis* (Eastern redbud)  
*Cornus mas*  
(Corneliancherry dogwood)  
*Cornus racemosa*  
(tree-form gray dogwood)  
*Crataegus × mordenensis*  
(‘Snowbird’ hawthorn)  
*Hamamelis vernalis*  
(Vernal witchhazel)  
*Hamamelis virginiana*  
(Common witchhazel)  
*Magnolia × loebneri*  
(‘Merrill’ magnolia)  
*Magnolia × soulangiana*  
(Saucer magnolia)  
*Magnolia stellata* (Star magnolia)

Japanese tree lilacs are beautiful small trees that tolerate the harshest conditions.

Contact Organizations

Forestry Division/Iowa Department of Natural Resources  
Wallace Building, 502 E. 9th St.  
Des Moines, IA  50319-0034  
(515) 281-5918  
www.iowadnr.gov/forestry

Iowa State University Extension Distribution Center  
Ames, IA  50011  
(515) 294-5247  
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Forestry  
Ames, IA  50011-3221  
(515) 294-1168  
www.forestry.iastate.edu

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Ames, IA  50011  
(515) 294-2751  
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Trees Forever  
770 7th Avenue, Marion, IA  52302  
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