Growers develop trees that perform well in difficult locations and situations

By Elizabeth Petersen

Since gardeners are limited in 2009 by the confines of parking strips and nearby neighbors, plants for tight spots are in high demand. As a result, the nursery industry is focused on easy-care plants and trees that pack a big design punch in small locations.

Growers that predicted the current need for smaller, easier trees are starting to reap the rewards of their work, even as newer options continue to arrive on the scene.

UtiliTrees

Wholesale tree grower J. Frank Schmidt & Son started about 15 years ago to compile a line of trees with "pedestrian-friendly branching." So-called UtiliTrees resist damage, tolerate a variety of soils, climates and urban conditions, and require minimal maintenance. All are upright branching to columnar in form, with naturally compact, vase-like shapes for the strip between street and sidewalk, where they are “unlikely to tangle” with overhead lines.

JFS marketing director Nancy Buley said it takes a long time and a lot of exposure for new introductions to finally catch on, but as UtiliTrees have proven themselves worthy, those who employ trees – arborists, urban foresters and landscape architects – are “finally starting to specify them.”

Two that Buley recommends are: Rugged Charm™ maple (Acer tataricum ‘JFS-KW2’), a refined selection with a shapely canopy, bright red seed wings and bold fall color; and Wedding Bells Silverbell (Halesia tetraptera ‘UConn Wedding Bells’), an “ideal silverbell” with large flowers borne prolifically along the branches. Both fit beneath lines, reaching roughly 20 feet by 15 feet.

For 2009, J. Frank Schmidt introduces City Sprite® zelkova (Zelkova serrata ‘JFS-KWI’) for tight urban spaces. A chance seedling found at the nursery, the upright vase-shaped cultivar is a “tough workhorse,” Buley said. It “isn’t sexy”...
It isn’t hard to get growers to talk about plants. The tough part is getting them to narrow down their list of favorites to just a handful. Here are some of the varieties our sources recommended:

### John Lewis
JLPN, Inc.
Salem, Ore.

**Acer griseum** – I love it. It’s a tri-foliate maple that isn’t the easiest to transplant, but the leaf color during the growing season and the fall is exceptional, and out of all shade trees by far and away, it has the best dark-cinnamon, peeling bark. Growing these in container and/or B&B is the industry norm. Paperbark maple is, without a doubt, a spectacle in any landscape year round.

**Acer freemonii** ‘Autumn Blaze’ – It is such a durable tree, a cross between silver and red maple that takes extremes of cold and hot and produces fire-red fall color. It performs very well in a wide range of soil types and the branch structure is very solid when exposed to ice and snow.

**Acer rubrum** ‘Red Sunset’ – Red Sunset has been a mainstay in the nursery industry for years, and there’s no doubt as to why. It has one of the very best fall colors for red maple with a mélange of yellow, peach, orange and red, and the leaves are glossy dark green in the summer, which is rare. It’s a strong grower and has stood the test of time in the industry.

### Maria Zampini
Lake County Nursery
Perry, Ohio

**Mr. Bowling Ball™ Arborvitae - Thuja occidentalis ‘Bobazam’** – The perfect no-maintenance plant for the consumer. Never needs trimming, naturally forms a perfect ball. In addition (and even better), it is a moneymaking plant for the grower, as it is practically labor free. We only trim it once, when we put the liner into a 3-gallon. We lightly trim with the power trimmers across the top of the crop to even it up and that is it – no side trimming necessary.

### Peggy Anne Montgomery
Bailey Nurseries
St. Paul, Minn.

**Twist-n-Shout Hydrangea (Hydrangea macrophylla)** – This reblooming lacecap is tough, hot and blooms on every terminal, with upright, red stems, a lighter bloom and great fall color.

### Tiger Eyes® Sumac

- It is shockingly gorgeous, and like pizza, I never get tired of it. The bright colors are great as an accent in big shrub borders or containers. More designers are using it to complement annuals and as an elegant addition to Japanese gardens.

### Ultra™ Common Hackberry - Celtis occidentalis ‘Ulzam’

- This hackberry is disease-free, and stronger growing than the species and other selections. Also significant is a higher percentage bud take compared to other cultivars.

### Meeting the market

John Lewis, owner of JLPN, Inc., a propagation nursery that brings new deciduous trees to the trade, agrees that people need compact solutions. “But they still want as many plants,” he said.

JLPN offers about 185 varieties of one-year, cutting-grown product to wholesale growers across the country. Lewis seeks trees with “strong marketable qualities” that he defines as a combination of geographic or environmental need, a specific use in the landscape, and the “Wow! factor.”

It is important to adjust to market demands, Lewis said, but “chasing the trends” carries a high risk, and growers with diverse product lines will fare better in hard economic times and when the market is glutted.
Lewis said that overproduction of certain shade trees has “wiped out the market for some of the ‘meat and potatoes’ trees, so we are left with the ‘condiments,’ and there is always demand for the out of the ordinary.”

One such “condiment” tree, the deciduous tree American Hophornbeam (Ostrya virginiana) adapts to many conditions, including part shade, develops spectacular fall color, and provides food for wildlife and shaggy, reddish-brown bark in winter.

The hunt for winners

Some introductions grown by JLPN come from the work of Jim Zampini, founder of Lake County Nursery in Ohio. Daughter Maria Zampini, now president of the 60-year-old business, credits the New Introductions program with bringing 125 trees and shrubs to the green industry. Jim’s work is well known to growers worldwide, and many in Oregon count themselves among the licensed growers that trial and evaluate Lake County’s new selections. Using the name “ZAM,” such trees offer four
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**Crabapples make the grade**
This year, as earlier introductions wind their way from grower to retail, a new ZAM crabapple debuts. Show Time™ (Malus ‘Shotizam’) is quickly earning a reputation among growers for the “phenomenal color” of its blooms. Zampini said they are “flourescent fuchsia red,” but “seeing is believing.”

“Oregon growers are great at sharing with their colleagues,” and when Show Time™ was in bloom at Hans Nelson & Sons Nursery, Dan Nelson contacted other growers who saw for themselves what makes this crabapple unique. The disease-free street tree “calipers up really good. A new crabapple has to be special, since the market is soft,” said Zampini.

Recent introduction Malus Royal Raindrops® from J. Frank Schmidt also meets the need for a small-scale, vigorous, disease-resistant tree. “(It’s) the nicest crabapple in a long time,” said Nancy Buley. The handsome, purple, cut-leaf tree features dramatic magenta blooms, brilliant fall color and a long-lasting display of red fruits. “It provides the look of a purple-leaf plum, but performs better,” said Buley, who told of a state forester in Olympia, Wash., who replaced her own Thundercloud Plum with Royal Raindrops®. “Now, all the neighbors want it.”

**Resisting heavy loads**
Jack and Jill, a recently introduced pair of dwarf pears from Lake County New Plants, are the only pears that fit beneath power lines, said Maria Zampini. Jack® (Pyrus calleryana ‘Jackzam’) requires an extra year to grow, but the increased cost for a longer production schedule is balanced by fewer labor costs, since the compact cultivar does not require head work as others do. Tested by an early,
Bailey’s “Trees Are Cool” campaign helps promote the understanding that planting just one tree can make a difference in both global and backyard environments. It says that people can keep cool while reducing utility costs, breathe cleaner air and control runoff, with little cost or work, all by planting trees.

After an “excruciatingly slow” process, about 20 years, Bailey added a small, reliable Japanese Tree Lilac, First Editions® Snowdance™ (Syringa reticulata ‘Bailnce’) to its lineup for 2009. Discovered by Rod Bailey, the precocious beauty blooms heavily “way younger than others, at one-, two- and three-year stages,” according to Bailey horticulturist Peggy Anne Montgomery. The “great small shade tree for urban yards” is a good choice for bloom midway between spring and summer. It boasts beautiful shelved, spreading branching, and it is “virtually sterile,” so owners don’t get messy seedpods or unwanted seedlings. Available at retail in 2009, it makes a good screen between neighbors or featured in a full sun border, where it will create dappled shade for understory plants.

Monrovia is enthusiastic about Jack too, and praises the tree’s growth habit, pure white flowers, glossy, dark green leaves and brilliant, crimson-red fall foliage. A low maintenance, fireblight-resistant, full sun option, it stays healthy in urban settings, stays small and makes an attractive street tree or small specimen.

Monrovia introduces another flowering “fruit” exclusive for 2009, a moderate size (18-20 feet by 10-12 feet) cherry dubbed Angel’s Blush® (Prunus serrulata ‘Taizo’). It produces loads of pink buds that open to distinctive, blushed white flowers with up to 30 petals per bloom.

Rooting for roots

Thanks to disease-resistant rootstock developed at Oregon State University, Monrovia has started a line of healthy Chamaecyparis lawsoniana cultivars that resist the fungal root disease, Phytophthora lateralis. The four Port Orford cedars in the Guardian™ Series prove the potential for bringing back more excellent cultivars, and to help fund additional research, Monrovia donates the royalties from sales back to the university.

For very small spaces, ‘Blue Surprise’ makes a great accent or container specimen, and the dense, compact, steel blue spire (6 feet by 2 feet) puts on a purple cast in winter. A little larger, ‘Yvonne’ (8-10 feet) sports golden-tipped, blue-green foliage that makes a bright, modest hedge or small space specimen. For a bigger job, to block wind or screen a view, robust ‘Golden King’ (30-40 feet by 15-18 feet) produces golden fans of foliage, and the similarly sized ‘Silberstar’ lends a silvery-blue look.

Finding beauty and fragrance for small sites

Each year, at facilities in five states, wholesale tree and shrub grower Bailey Nurseries produces millions of seedlings, millions of cuttings, and millions of bareroot trees and shrubs. While the nursery continues to bring useful landscape material to the market, it also sponsors a national program to encourage the planting of trees.
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First Editions® Autumn Revolution™ (Celastrus scandens ‘Baillumn’) said the self-fertile selection “grows like mad” and produces “perfect flowers” followed by “huge, dark-orange berries that pop open to reveal dark red-orange.” She has seen it used effectively on tall deer fences, where the it holds up to “trimming” by local wildlife.

**Hot at retail**

Trees have to be flexible to flourish, said John Lewis, who likes the landscape flexibility of columnar flowering plum Crimson Pointe™. “It’s a great product” with purple foliage that tolerates heat and cold, making it desirable for areas with extreme climates, and it stays a manageable size.

Crimson Pointe, a Lake County introduction, is “hot at retail right now,” Zampini said. The versatile tree’s branches nearly parallel the trunk and produce a strong columnar form. It works well with its branches trimmed higher, left lower or treated as a shrub. Glossy bronze foliage takes on maroon tones as they age, and showy white flowers decorate the tree in spring.

Monrovia, which has trialed and promoted new plants for over eighty years, confirms the value of Crimson Pointe for small spots. Trees mature at 25-30 feet tall by 10 feet wide.

Other “really cool” new narrow introductions coming from Lake County include Emerald Pointe™, a hardy rubber tree that is “perfect for tight spaces,” only 5-6 feet wide with serrated, thick, wavy leaves and a narrow columnar habit.

Golden Candle™, a columnar golden rain tree, also makes a great choice for the urban landscape, where trees are exposed to drought, heat and even wet soil.

A larger, unique tree, the Celebration maple boasts branches that grow at a tight angle, so it doesn’t give in to heavy loads. It has developed a good reputation in recent years, Zampini said, for a unique root habit that doesn’t heave sidewalks. Celebration is also virtually seedless, and its color is spectacular.

Highland Park maple, now grown by six Oregon growers, has very thick, tatterproof foliage that contributes to its superior drought tolerance. It is disease resistant and has a high sugar count, so testing is underway for use in sugar production, too. Elizabeth Petersen writes for gardeners and garden businesses, coaches students and writers, and tends a one-acre garden in West Linn, Ore. She can be reached at gardenwrite@comcast.net.