These columnar selections offer all the benefits of trees, along with a small footprint

By Elizabeth Petersen

We ask a lot of trees these days. We want them to filter air, reduce heat and soften our surroundings. They also have to look good, resist disease and not take up any space.

For these demanding criteria, we rely on columnar trees — those tall, slim characters that line thoroughfares, parking lots and property lines without getting in anybody’s way.

“Customers choose columnar trees wherever space is limited: between buildings, in street planting strips, and along right-of-ways,” said Art Anderson, general manager of Northwest Shade Trees in Brooks, Ore. “Urban centers keep packing more into smaller spaces, and multiple-use areas limit the kinds and sizes of trees that can be used. Increased demand for columnar trees is coming from many different areas,
where wide-spreading branches would not be appropriate.”

Keith Warren, director of product development at J. Frank Schmidt & Son in Boring, Ore., agreed. “Columnar trees are important for cities, and there is strong demand for trees that don’t block signs or hang over streets,” he said. “Urban foresters want to reduce the urban heat effect, and improved columnar trees help without adding other problems.”

The utility of these trees is considerable. They grow straight up along roads to buffer subdivisions from traffic. They create visual screens, and can serve as tall hedges between properties. They also can function as focal points in landscape design.

Many people wonder, what is the difference between columnar and fastigiate? The term “columnar” usually refers to naturally narrow trees. They might have short, uniform branches or weeping or pendulous branches that hang close to the trunk. In more general terms, anything with the narrow, column-like form can be said to be columnar.

The term “fastigiate” is used to describe trees that have multiple trunks or branches that grow straight up. Held closely together, they produce a uniform, narrow shape.

A better breed of tree

Breeders have worked to improve the qualities seen in columnar trees. Columnar trees with fastigiate branching can have problems falling open. According to Warren, this is “a factor of leverage.”

But new selections, bred and discovered over the last few decades, continue to arrive on the market to fill demand. Improved disease resistance, especially among oaks, adds desirability.

“New introductions have been tested for their resilience to storm damage,” Anderson said. Better crotch angles and shorter, stiffer, tighter branching help maintain a narrow structure.
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“Columnar trees need to stand up to snow loads,” said Pat Bizon, one of the owners of Bizon Nursery in Hubbard, Ore. “Otherwise, there is little market for them.”

The perfect combination of features is a narrow, upright habit and short, stubby or pendulous branching, agreed Greg Anderson, general manager at Bizon.

Many purchasers of columnar trees look at how tall the tree will eventually be.

“Mature height is an important consideration with columnar trees,” Art Anderson said. “Many city street tree lists have columnar trees on them because of limited room for the top of a tree. Trees on urban lists are often shorter in mature height and do not have aggressive root systems which

The upright Japanese plum yew (Cephalotaxus harringtonia ‘Fastigiata’, shown growing at Bizon Nursery near Hubbard, Ore.) matures to a tight, attractive conifer that is broader at the top than at the base. It’s a prime example of a tree that is fastigiate rather than columnar.

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cause problems with sidewalks and building foundations.

Garden designer Lauren Hall-Behrens, owner of Lilyvilla Gardens in Portland, Ore., uses columnar trees as exclamation points to produce a sense of structure and organization. “(I use) small spires to create rhythm,” she said. “I place plants in patterns and locations to pull the visitor’s eye through the garden.”

It is important to choose carefully, especially for urban gardens. “The context is as important as the plants themselves,” Lauren said. “The vernacular of the architecture is important, but columnar plants are useful with both 1950s houses and tall Victorians.”

Tall, narrow plants in smaller spaces help bring the scale of the architecture into an appropriate relationship with the surrounding landscape, Lauren said.

“In addition, it is important to balance the upright forms with soft, mounding shapes planted in the ground plane,” she said.

Here are a few recommendations from our sources that work especially well in today’s landscapes.

Tall, narrow and deciduous

Apollo® sugar maple (Acer saccharum ‘Barrett Cole’) — On the market for 15 years, Apollo sugar maple is, “wonderful,” Warren said. Very compact, it grows slowly and maintains its size and shape with less pruning. It is an excellent choice for areas with more acidic soil, including the upper

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— Keith Warren
J. Frank Schmidt & Son Co.
Midwest, East Coast, mid-Atlantic and Pacific Northwest.

**Belle Tower™ maple (Acer saccharum ‘Reba’)** — Suited for conditions in Southern states, this unusual sugar maple tolerates heat, humidity and Japanese beetles. Tested by Jeff Sibley of Auburn University, it is among the narrowest and most upright forms, it grows faster and has a “southern flavor,” Warren said.

**Frans Fontaine hornbeam (Carpinus betulus ‘Frans Fontaine’)** — An improved version of the much used ‘Fastigiata’ form that typically bulks out with age, ‘Frans Fontaine’ will stay much more narrow, according to Art Anderson.

**Fagus sylvatica ‘Red Obelisk’** — This narrow, columnar beech is a highly recommended improvement over ‘Dawyck Purple.’ Slightly dissected, curled leaf edges provide interesting texture and form. The purple foliage is a brighter red, Art Anderson said. It grows at a moderate rate and stays very narrow.

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**Emerald Sentinel® sweetgum (Liquidambar styraciflua ‘Clydesform’) —** An unusually compact and upright narrow sweetgum with great, tight form. Found at a nursery in Eugene, Ore., it has sturdy, upright branching and a slower growth rate than most sweetgums.

**Crimson Spire® oak (Quercus robur × Q. alba ‘Crimschmidt’) —** Among the most successful of crosses and back crosses between English oak (Quercus robur) and white oak (Quercus alba), the rugged, tightly fastigiate, fast-growing tree has superior attributes from both species.

It is widely adapted to diverse climates and growing conditions, making an excellent choice for streetscapes and landscapes. The dense green foliage stays bright during summer, turns rusty to bright red in autumn and clings to the tree through winter.

Crimson Spire is appreciated by growers for its ease of care and by
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Digger magazine
Published every month for more than 50 years, Digger boasts a national and international readership of more than 8,000 nursery professionals. Digger: Farwest Edition reaches more — over 12,000 readers!

Yard, Garden & Patio Show
Portland’s best consumer garden show marks the official start of the gardening season. Some 25,000 gardeners come to see visually stunning display gardens and hear national gardening experts. YGP lets retailers, landscape designers, contractors and nurseries connect directly with them. Over 90 percent are homeowners and 77 percent make a purchase.

OAN Nursery Guide: Where buyers find you
With more than 350,000 page views a year, and a print circulation of 7,000 across the U.S., Nursery Guide and www.NurseryGuide.com are an important way for buyers to find plants and suppliers. New features to maximize visibility for OAN members are being added to the online buyers guide. Membership is required for listings and every member can benefit, whether selling wholesale or to home gardeners.

Nursery & Garden Center Guide
This detailed map and guide helps 30,000 gardeners discover a wealth of OAN-member garden centers, specialty nurseries, landscape professionals and online retailers. The Nursery & Garden Center Guide is also available in an online version at www.oan.org/retailmap.

Random Acts of Gardening
The OAN’s gardening e-newsletter and blog (RandomGardening.blogspot.com) reaches more than 3,000 gardeners. The blog often features OAN member retail nurseries, garden centers and landscape professionals. Its mission is to promote OAN members, gardening and the nursery industry.

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landscape designers for its columnar form and stately appearance.

**Kindred Spirit™ oak (Quercus robur × bicolor ‘Nadler’ PP17604)** — Among the tightest of columnar trees, this hybrid of English and swamp white oaks boasts mildew and drought resistance and tolerance of urban soils. Kindred Spirit is significantly tighter than Regal Prince, a sister seedling.

**Tall, narrow conifer trees**

*Cedrus libani* ‘Glauca pendula’ — This weeping blue cedar for colder regions makes a striking “skyline plant,” Greg Anderson said, with occasional “ghostly arms” stretching out from a narrow central leader. Its height and irregular pendulous branches make it a focal point in the landscape.

*Cephalotaxus harringtonia* ‘Fastigiata’ — Useful for tolerance to shade and resistance to deer, this Japanese plum yew produces a column of sturdy, fastigiate branches. It grows slowly, produces yellow spring growth and dark green summer foliage. As narrow, tall, evergreen hedging, it can take up to 90 percent shade, Greg Anderson said.

*Chamaecyparis nootkatensis* ‘Vanden Akker’ — “By far the most columnar, upright plant we grow at Bizon,” Greg Anderson said. Extremely tight and narrow, with short weeping branches, it tends towards bronzy coloration in winter, unlike its look-alike relative, the older C. n. ‘Green Arrow.’

*Picea glauca* ‘Pendula’ — This popular, elegant spruce goes everywhere, said Sandy Dittmar of Iseli Nursery. It is her “favorite tree on the nursery.” It is consistent and easy. “You can plant it right on the lot line and it just goes up and up,” she said. “Staked at the nursery, it continues its upward route even after reaching the top of the ladder.”

**Smaller columnar trees for smaller sites**

*Acer palmatum ‘Twombly’s Red Sentinel’* — According to Greg
Anderson, this is “one of the hottest selections right now.” Smaller, deep purple-red leaves and short, lateral branches growing in neat stacks create a nice columnar form.

**Ilex crenata ‘Dwarf Pagoda’** — For sun or shade, this slow growing evergreen holly with tiny green leaves and irregular branching stays small and narrow.

**Ilex crenata ‘Maresii’** — For sun or shade, this evergreen holly has a “more open habit for a less formal, quieter statement.” Lauren said. It can get up to ten feet with age.

**Juniperus communis ‘Brynhyfryd Gold’** — A new, narrow juniper, this small conifer produces bright yellow spring tips and retains yellow undertones through summer. Best color in full sun.
Juniperus communis ‘Compressa’—A tiny, tight column of silvery blue foliage, a “great plant for a small garden,” Greg Anderson said.

Picea abies ‘Cupressina’—With fastigiate growth and a reliably narrow form, this is an excellent option for snow zones. It can take a snow load and bounce back, Greg Anderson said. It is very popular in the Rocky Mountain states.

Pinus thunbergii ‘Koto buki’—Tight and upright, this Japanese black pine has a “nice, natural garden look,” Greg Anderson said. It’s a good choice for containers or rock gardens because it stays small and narrow. White buds and candles produce a striking effect.

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.