



Bursera simaruba Gumbo-Limbo¹

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INTRODUCTION

This large semievergreen tree, with an open, irregular to rounded crown, may reach 60 feet in height with an equal or wider spread but is usually seen smaller (25 to 40 feet tall and 25 to 30 feet wide) in landscape plantings (Fig. 1). The trunk and branches are thick and are covered with resinous, smooth, peeling coppery bark with an attractive, shiny, freshly-varnished appearance. The tree typically develops from two to four, large-diameter limbs originating close to the ground. A native of south Florida and the tropical offshore islands, the soft, light-weight and easily carved wood of gumbo-limbo was used for making carousel horses before the advent of molded plastics.

GENERAL INFORMATION

Scientific name: *Bursera simaruba*

Pronunciation: ber-SER-uh sim-uh-ROO-buh

Common name(s): Gumbo-Limbo

Family: *Burseraceae*

USDA hardiness zones: 10B through 11 (Fig. 2)

Origin: native to North America

Uses: large parking lot islands (> 200 square feet in size); wide tree lawns (>6 feet wide); medium-sized parking lot islands (100-200 square feet in size); medium-sized tree lawns (4-6 feet wide); recommended for buffer strips around parking lots or for median strip plantings in the highway; near a deck or patio; shade tree; specimen; residential street tree; tree has been successfully grown in urban areas where air pollution, poor drainage, compacted soil, and/or drought are common

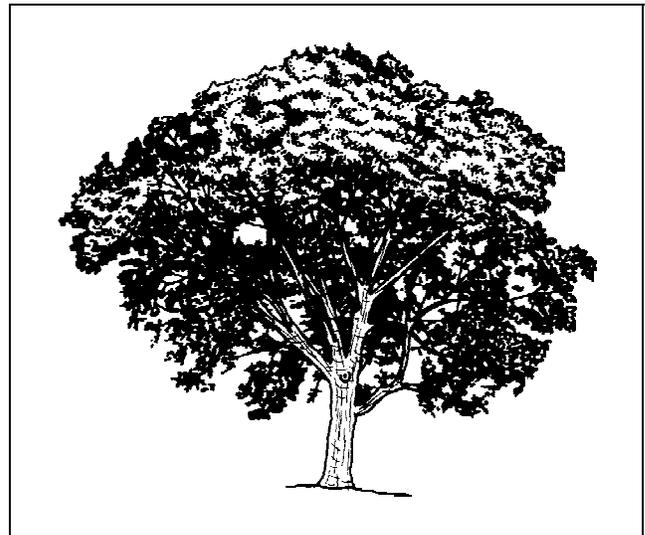


Figure 1. Mature Gumbo-Limbo.

Availability: generally available in many areas within its hardiness range

DESCRIPTION

Height: 25 to 40 feet

Spread: 25 to 40 feet

Crown uniformity: irregular outline or silhouette

Crown shape: round

Crown density: open

Growth rate: medium

Texture: medium

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Figure 2. Shaded area represents potential planting range.

Foliage

Leaf arrangement: alternate (Fig. 3)

Leaf type: odd pinnately compound

Leaflet margin: entire

Leaflet shape: elliptic (oval); ovate

Leaflet venation: banchidodrome; pinnate

Leaf type and persistence: semievergreen

Leaflet blade length: 2 to 4 inches

Leaf color: green

Fall color: no fall color change

Fall characteristic: not showy

Flower

Flower color: green

Flower characteristics: inconspicuous and not showy; spring flowering

Fruit

Fruit shape: oval

Fruit length: .5 to 1 inch

Fruit covering: fleshy

Fruit color: red

Fruit characteristics: does not attract wildlife; inconspicuous and not showy; no significant litter problem

Trunk and Branches

Trunk/bark/branches: bark is thin and easily damaged from mechanical impact; droop as the tree grows, and will require pruning for vehicular or pedestrian clearance beneath the canopy; routinely grown with, or trainable to be grown with, multiple trunks; tree wants to grow with several trunks but can be trained to grow with a single trunk; very showy trunk; no thorns

Pruning requirement: needs little pruning to develop a strong structure

Breakage: resistant

Current year twig color: brown; green; reddish

Current year twig thickness: medium; thick

Culture

Light requirement: tree grows in part shade/part sun; tree grows in full sun

Soil tolerances: clay; loam; sand; acidic; alkaline; well-drained

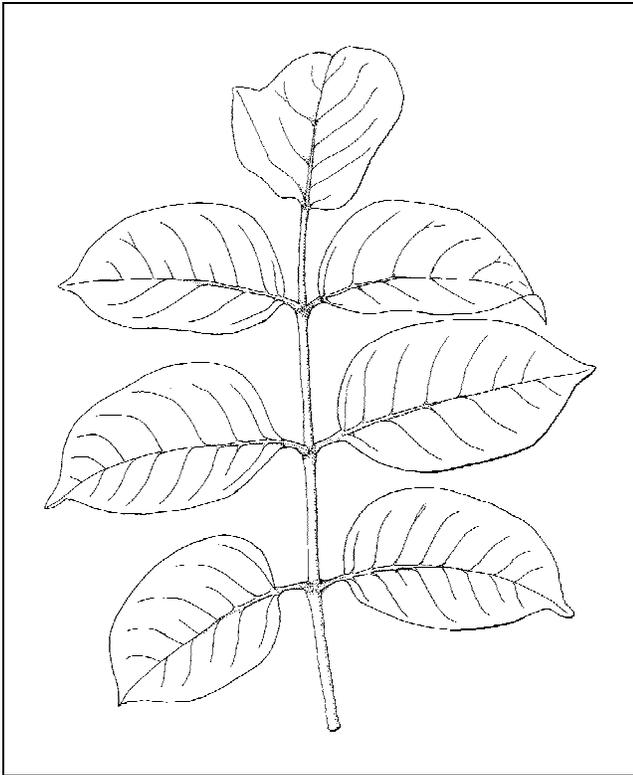


Figure 3. Foliage of Gumbo-Limbo.

Drought tolerance: high

Aerosol salt tolerance: high

Other

Roots: surface roots can lift sidewalks or interfere with mowing

Winter interest: tree has winter interest due to unusual form, nice persistent fruits, showy winter trunk, or winter flowers

Outstanding tree: tree has outstanding ornamental features and could be planted more

Invasive potential: little, if any, potential at this time

Pest resistance: no pests are normally seen on the tree

USE AND MANAGEMENT

Although growth rate is rapid and wood is soft, gumbo-limbo trees have great resistance to strong winds, drought, and neglect. Drought avoidance is accomplished by leaf drop and growth is often best in drier locations not receiving irrigation. The inconspicuous flowers are followed by red, three-sided berries which split into three sections at maturity to reveal a 1/4-inch triangular red seed. The fruit takes a year to ripen and matures in early summer.

Gumbo-limbo grows in full sun or partial shade on a wide range of well-drained soils. Tolerant of moderate amounts of salt spray, gumbo-limbo adapts to alkaline or poor, deep white sands but will also grow quickly on more fertile soil. Once established, gumbo-limbo requires little attention other than occasional pruning to remove lower branches which may droop close to the ground.

Gumbo-limbo is ideal for a freestanding specimen on a large property or as a street tree but does need room to grow. Lower branches will grow close to the ground, so street trees will have to be trained early for proper development. Locate the lowest permanent branch about 15 feet off the ground to provide enough clearance for a street tree planting. Specimen trees are often grown with branches beginning much closer to the ground, providing a beautiful specimen plant with wonderful bark.

Propagation is by seed which germinates readily if fresh but, most often, gumbo-limbo is propagated by cuttings of any size twig or branch. Huge truncheons (up to 12 inches in diameter) are planted in the ground where they sprout and grow into a tree. Be sure to properly prune and train a tree grown in this fashion, since many sprouts often develop along the trunk after planting. A tree left to grow in this manner usually develops weak branches which may fall from the tree as it grows older. Space major branches out along the main trunk to create a strong tree. It is probably best to plant seed-grown trees or those propagated from smaller, more traditionally-sized cuttings.

Pests and Diseases

No pests or diseases are of major concern. Occasionally caterpillars will chew the leaves, but rarely damage enough to warrant control.