

Trees: A Keystone to Life As We Know It

What is a Keystone Species?

A keystone plant species is a plant that supports the life cycle of many species. Without these keystone species, the life cycles collapse, which collapses the ecosystem. In other words, without these species present, we enter a waste land, void of life and full of struggles.

According to entomologist Dr. Doug Tallamy, keystone species make up 14% of native plant life which supports 90% of all moth and butterfly species. 96% of terrestrial birds rely on keystone species. And there is a long list of why birds are important for humans: natural pest control (insects and rodents), native seed and beneficial fungus dispersal, soil fertilizer, pollination, and providing us happiness! We need them more than they need us.

Wind in the Willows

Trees get a bad rap because of Hurricanes. But we need trees to slow hurricane winds. Why have so many recent hurricanes sustained high winds for so long into the interior of our state? One reason is there are only fragmented forests and buildings to slow the wind. Buildings are terrible at slowing winds while trees are very effective at it.

A big myth is that oak trees should be cut down to protect your house in a hurricane or high winds. Of course, if it is diseased or declining, it's best to bring it down. The truth is, trees protect buildings from strong winds. Think of it as creating a wall or moat around your castle (home). Similar to any sports team, one tree by itself isn't a great defense. It takes many trees working together to achieve the best results. Groups of trees work together to slow winds and support each other through high winds.

What if instead of cutting down healthy trees, we planted more? We need more than just lone trees. Many trees support each other and keep us safer. We must connect our fragments.



Lignum Vitae



Mature Sand Live Oak

Planting a Seed for the Future

We can apply these thoughts and ideas to our home landscapes. There are many different size trees that can fit any size landscape, especially as we build homes closer and closer together. We select our native keystone species that support hundreds or even thousands of life cycles that we as humans rely on, to plant our homes. We construct our environment with these keystone species and build our walls. House by house, we create a community of trees, and an ecosystem bustling with life.



Native Landscape featuring palms, pines, and cypress

Choosing Trees for your Landscape

First, take inventory of your site. Look for utilities, driveways and pathways, and how much space you have on your property. You may also need to consider pools and septic tanks in your planning.

Next, consider tree size. Large trees exceed 40 feet in height, medium trees are up to 40 feet, and small trees are around 15-20 feet.

Large trees should be planted at least 15 feet from your foundation, medium sized trees 10 feet, and small trees 6-8 feet. Plant medium and large trees at least 20 feet from overhead obstacles such as power lines. For all other ground level site considerations, such as water meters, place most trees 4-6 feet away.



Silver Buttonwood

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Small Trees (Under 20 feet)



Pigeon Plum

Plant	Moisture, Sun, Growth Habit, notes
Wax Myrtle	Moist-Dry, Part - Full Sun ↑ 15-20', ↔ 10-15', fast growing
Yaupon Holly	Moist-Dry, size varies based on cultivar, Only female fruit
Myrtle Oak	Dry-Very Dry, Full Sun, ↑ 10-15', ↔ 10, shrub-like oak
Chickasaw/ Flatwoods Plum	Moist-Avg, Part shade - full sun, ↑ 10-20', ↔ 10-20, spring blooms
Silver Buttonwood	Dry-Very Dry, Full Sun, ↑ 15-20', ↔ 15-20', salt tolerant
Wild Lime	Avg-Very Dry, Part- full Sun, ↑ 6-20', ↔ 6-20', thorns
Bay Cedar	Dry-Very Dry, Part- full Sun, ↑ 6-10', ↔ 6-10', salt tolerant

Medium Trees (20-40 feet)

Plant	Moisture, Sun, Growth Habit, notes
Dahoon Holly	Moist-Avg, Part-Full sun, ↑ 20-30', ↔ 10-15', winter berries
Sweetbay Magnolia	Moist-Avg, Shade-Full Sun, ↑ 20-30', ↔ 10-15'
Sand Live Oak	Dry-Very Dry, Full Sun, ↑ 30-40', ↔ 20-40', acorns, caterpillars
Pigeon Plum	Avg- Dry, Part - Full Sun, ↑ 30-40', ↔ 15-20', fruit for birds
Green Buttonwood	Avg-Very Dry, Full Sun, ↑ 15-30', ↔ 10-30', salt tolerant
Hercules Club	Avg-Very Dry, Full Sun, ↑ 15-30', ↔ 10-25'
Southern Red Cedar	Avg-Dry, Part- Full sun, ↑ 25-45', ↔ 20-30', fruit
Bluejack Oak	Avg- Very Dry, Part- Full sun, ↑ 35', ↔ 20-30',



Pignut Hickory

Large Trees (40+ feet)



South Florida Slash Pine 'Densa'
is shorter and broader

Plant	Moisture, Sun, Growth Habit, notes
American Sycamore	Moist-avg, full sun, ↑ 75'+, ↔ 50'+, Hosts 40+ caterpillars
Winged Elm	Avg-Dry, ↑ 40-70', ↔ 30-40', nesting, interesting bark
Southern Live Oak	Moist-Avg, ↑ 60-80', ↔ 60-100'+, acorns, caterpillars
Slash Pine	Moist-Very Dry, Part- Full Sun, ↑ 75'+, ↔ 35-50'
Pignut Hickory	Moist-Very Dry, Full Sun, ↑ ↔ 30-100', Fall color
Sugarberry	Moist-Dry, Full Sun, ↑ ↔ 50-70', fast growing