

Splendiferous Native Shade Trees



(Author's Note: This is the sixth in a series of articles by members of the City of Sanibel Vegetation Committee dealing with vegetative matters of concern to island residents. Members of the Vegetation Committee are Sanibel residents appointed by City Council for one-year terms. To be considered for appointment, contact the City Manager's Office at (239) 472-3700.)

When people think of Florida, they often think of palm trees. While we do have an abundance of palms, Florida also has several beautiful shade trees that rival those found up north and native to Sanibel. The term shade tree usually applies to large trees with a spreading canopy, and quite a few of Sanibel's native trees fall into this category. While some are semi-deciduous, and many are not, which means the tree is never completely bare.

The Mahogany, *Swietenia mahagoni*, is a large tree with a grooved bark with dimensions of 40'-60' x 40'-60'. It is briefly deciduous in the spring when old foliage is shed suddenly and is quickly replaced by new growth. The leaves are small and Mahoganies casts shade as a light shadow. Flowers are quite small but fragrant. The seed capsules are the size of pears and can explode. This may be the reason it can be considered a dirty tree. It has a moderate to fast growth rate, grows in full sun to part shade, tolerates a wide range of soil from dry to moist, but does need to be well-drained, is drought tolerant, and resistant to salt spray. Because of the color and durability of the Mahogany wood, harvesting this valuable timber has resulted in the Mahogany being placed under legal protection in Florida as placed on the State Threatened Species list. Several amazing examples of the Mahogany can be seen in front of Bank of the Islands and Sanibel Public Library. These examples made it through Hurricane Ian, a category 5 hurricane, unscathed and re-leafed in a couple of months.



The Mahogany, *Swietenia mahagoni*
(Photo: Courtesy of City of Sanibel)

The Gumbo Limbo, *Bursera simaruba*, is a medium to large tree, 25'-50' x 25'-50'. The origin of its unusual name is unknown. It is briefly, but not usually obviously, deciduous and begins to sprout while old leaves are falling. The Gumbo Limbo is one of the fastest growing native trees and is very adaptive to the Sanibel climate. It is very wind resistant and is recommended as a hurricane resistant species. After Hurricane Ian the Gumbo Limbos were slow to comeback but eventually sprouted leaves. ~~and~~ The Gumbo Limbo often has contorted limbs with an open and asymmetrical crown. The distinctive peeling bark can be either a thin, reddish-brown to coppery color or thin gray to ~~silvery~~silvery, and exposes a smooth dark green, greenish-brown or coppery under-bark. The bark peels just like a tourist who is overdone with the sun, turns red and then peels. For this reason, the Gumbo Limbo is often called the "tourist tree". This tree grows in full sun to partial shade, adapts to a variety of soil from alkaline to sandy, has high drought tolerance, and tolerates moderate salt spray. The resin can be used as a glue or anti-inflammatory. Its summer, deep-red fruit is a delectable for mocking birds.—A trimmed limb from the Gumbo Limbo can be placed in water until roots begin to erupt and then planted, and viola~~"Voila"~~, you have a new Gumbo Limbo tree; maturing in 18 months!!

The Jamaica Dogwood, *Pisidia piscipala*, is a medium to large tree generally 25' - 35' but can reach 40'-50' with a rounded, irregular canopy with a moderate to fast growth rate. The Jamaica Dogwood's white tinged with red pea-like flowers are followed by papery, brown seed pods that are winged, lending an interesting look. The Jamaica Dogwood blooms in May and is attractive to bees. It is the larval host to several butterflies. The leaves are 5-11 opposite leaflets, 1.5 to 3 inches long, that are dark green on top with an underside of light green. This tree is deciduous: Prior to blooming, it tends to drop most of its leaves. The Jamaica Dogwood likes full-sun and is intolerant of shade. The soil should be well-drained or sandy. It can tolerate short-term storm surges of brackish water. The City Hall Native Planting area has several Jamaica Dogwoods that are coming back after Hurricane Ian. This tree is highly drought-tolerant but very sensitive to cold. The Jamaica Dogwood also is called the Florida Fish Poison tree as its leaf extract can be used to stun fish. This practice is illegal in Florida.

The Live Oak, *Quercus virginiana*, is a medium to large tree reaching 30'-40' with a broad-spreading canopy wider than the tree is tall. Young Live Oaks grow quickly, as much as three feet in height and one inch in trunk diameter each year, and are wonderful for wildlife, although it takes about 20 years for the tree to begin producing acorns. Maybe this is the reason there are few squirrels on Sanibel. It will grow in partial shade but prefers full sun, likes moist, acidic soils of sand, clay or loam, has a high drought tolerance, and tolerates salt air

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and is moderately tolerant of salt in the soil. Although appearing to be evergreen the Live Oak is considered semi-deciduous, pushing old growth out to make way for new in early spring; but is nearly evergreen since it never goes completely or even noticeably bare. Epiphytic plants (air plants), such as night-blooming cereus, staghorn fern, and especially Spanish moss, are often seen growing on older Live Oak trees. A large stand of mature Live Oak trees can be seen at the entrance to Health Park off Summerlin, and younger trees have been planted along much of Periwinkle Way. Larger Live Oaks found on San-Cap Road with a higher elevation away from shore made it through Hurricane Ian. —



Gumbo Limbo, *Bursera simaruba*
(Photo: Courtesy of City of Sanibel)



The Live Oak, *Quercus virginiana*
(Photo: Courtesy of City of Sanibel)

The Strangler Fig, *Ficus aurea*, is a medium to large tree reaching 30'-40' with an almost equal canopy. It is a fast growing native, evergreen that grows in full sun or shade, tolerates a variety of well-drained soil, has high drought tolerance, and moderate salt spray tolerance. The Strangler Fig occurs only in Florida. Each tree bears the male and female flowers with leaves four inches long. In nature, animals leave the sticky seed from the Strangler Fig in a tree branch or the crevice of a palm, and the seed grows as an epiphyte on the tree's surface. Long roots descend eventually reaching the ground and entering the soil. Over time, the latticework roots become grafted together and enclose the host's trunk, sometimes killing the host but leaving the Strangler Fig with an apparent trunk that is actually a gigantic cylinder of roots. They bloom from spring to summer. The fruit is a small, paired, green fig turning golden. The fig is edible and was eaten by Native Americans and early Florida settlers. The importance of the Strangler Fig is in "environscaping" in conserving energy. The Strangler Figs re-leaved after Hurricane Ian but rapidly defoliated due to one part of the life cycle of the Edwards wasp moth — its caterpillar — it has a particularly voracious appetite for all things Ficus. Hurricane Ian did away with a lot of the moth's native predators like wasps and flies leaving a large number of Edward wasp moth caterpillars. After a couple of months the Strangler Figs leafed out again.



The Strangler Fig, *Ficus aurea*
(Photo: Courtesy of City of Sanibel)

All of these trees can become massive so planting location is important. In general, recommended planting distance is at least 20 to 25 feet from buildings, and a good distance from sidewalks and curbs which can be displaced by the root system of many native trees. The Sanibel vegetation standards require that any tree or shrub that exceeds 20 feet in height at maturity be planted at least 10 feet from the vertical plane of the overhead power line. In the case of these trees, the building and power line recommendations would not be adequate, so know what you are planting. Always call 811 before you dig so that any cable, electric, or utility lines can be marked.

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The Wild Tamarind, *Lysiloma latisiliquum* or false Tamarind is a native, medium to large tree 40'-60' tall with a short trunk and an open canopy. The crown is dense with many arching branches in an umbrella shape becoming more open with age. The Wild Tamarind requires well-drained soil and needs pruning to give a strong structure. The tree is strong and can resist harsh winds and was resilient after Hurricane Ian after re-leaving. The bark is smooth and light gray in young trees. The Wild Tamarind's feathery leaves are 3-5 pairs of pinnate. The fern like leaflets are 10-20 oblong 1/5 - 1/2 inch leaflets. The white, showy flowers are powder puffs 3/5 inches in diameter on new growth or terminal branches. These fragrant flowers attract bees and butterflies. The fruit is a flat, somewhat twisted brown pod about 5 inches in length. The Wild Tamarind requires well-drained soil. It is not related to the true Tamarind, *Tamarindus indica* and should not be confused with the invasive, noxious Lead tree, *Leucaena leucocephala*.

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There are many more wonderful native shade trees to choose from such as the Jamaica Dogwood and the Wild Tamarind. Both of these trees as well as the others described here can be seen at Sanibel City Hall grounds. Guided tours are offered as well. For more information call the City's Natural Resources Department at (239)472-3700 or visit the City's website, www.mysanibel.com. Click on the Natural Resources Department, Vegetation Information, Native vegetation to access a variety of helpful resources. You can also stop in

at any of the local native plant nurseries for a list of native vegetation and check out all the wonderful options available for purchase there.