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[Home](#) » [Natural Resources](#) » **Native Trees, Shrubs, and Grasses for Urban Coastal Landscapes**

Native Trees, Shrubs, and Grasses for Urban Coastal Landscapes

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There are many challenges to planting in residential and urban spaces in Coastal North Carolina. Compacted soil, drought, and poor plant selection can lead to short life spans for newly installed plants. Many native plants can perform well in these conditions and provide a host of ecosystem services and wildlife benefits.

This list provides suggestions for native shrubs, trees, and grasses that may do well in residential and urban settings. Care should be taken to assess water and light needs when choosing a plant for a site. More information on these plants can be found in the North Carolina Extension Gardener Plant Toolbox: <https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/>

Large Trees- 50+’ tall at maturity

Common Name	Scientific Name	Height	Spread	Form	Notes
Bald Cypress	<u><i>Taxodium distichum</i></u>	50-70’	20-30’	Columnar	Drought tolerant once established
Pond Cypress	<u><i>Taxodium distichum</i></u> <u>var. <i>imbricarium</i></u>	30-50’	15-20’	Columnar	More narrow and shorter than Bald Cypress
Long Leaf Pine	<u><i>Pinus palustris</i></u>	60-100’	30-40’	Rounded	Best planted in groupings
Overcup Oak	<u><i>Quercus lyrata</i></u>	35-60’	35-60’	Rounded	Very urban tolerant
Nuttall Oak	<u><i>Quercus texana</i></u>	30-60’	30-60’	Rounded	Works as a street or shade tree

Live Oak	<u><i>Quercus virginiana</i></u>	40-80'	30-100'	Spreading	Iconic SE NC tree, 'Cathedral' cultivar is smaller
Laurel Oak/Darlington Oak	<u><i>Quercus hemisphaerica</i></u>	40-60'	30-40'	Pyramidal	Works as a street tree or shade tree
Swamp White Oak	<u><i>Quercus bicolor</i></u>	50-60'	50-60'	Rounded	Tolerant of compacted soil and drought
Pin Oak	<u><i>Quercus palustris</i></u>	50-70'	40-60'	Oval	Tolerates heat, air pollution and compacted soil
Shumard oak	<u><i>Quercus shumardii</i></u>	50-70'	30-40'	Pyramidal	Tolerates pollution and compacted soil, beautiful fall color
Cherrybark oak	<u><i>Quercus pagoda</i></u>	90-100'	30-70'	Rounded	Adaptable to drier sites, can be a shade or street tree
Southern Magnolia	<u><i>Magnolia grandiflora</i></u>	60-80'	30-50'	Conical	Many Cultivars, highly wind tolerant
Tulip Poplar	<u><i>Liriodendron tulipifera</i></u>	80-100'	30-60'	Pyramidal	Fast growing, high wildlife value

Medium Trees- 20-35' at Maturity

Common Name	Scientific Name	Height	Spread	Form	Notes
Eastern Redcedar	<u><i>Juniperus virginiana</i></u>	30-40'	10-20'	Pyramidal	Very drought and salt tolerant
Sweetbay Magnolia	<u><i>Magnolia virginiana</i></u>	10-30'	10-20'	Columnar	Excellent substitute for Crepe Myrtle
Dahoon Holly	<u><i>Ilex cassine</i></u>	20-30'	10-15'	Oval	Better with irrigation
American Holly	<u><i>Ilex opaca</i></u>	40-60'	10-20'	Conical	Extremely urban tolerant
River Birch	<u><i>Betula nigra</i></u>	30-70'	40-60'	Open	Good for narrow spaces, interesting bark

Black Gum	<u><i>Nyssa sylvatica</i></u>	40-60'	20-35'	Rounded	Tolerant of compacted soils, fruitless cultivars available
American Hornbeam/Ironwood	<i>Carpinus carolinana</i>	20-30'	20-30'	Oval	Adaptable to a variety of sites, not a street tree
Thornless Honey Locust	<u><i>Gleditsia triacanthos</i></u> var. <i>inermis</i> 'Skyline'	40-45'	30-40'	Pyramidal	Tolerates wet and dry sites, salt, compacted soil
Southern Magnolia cultivars	<u><i>Magnolia grandiflora</i></u> 'Little Gem', 'Kay Parris', others	60-80'	20-30'	Columnar	Best placed in a landscape, many smaller cultivars available

Smaller/Understory Trees- 15-25' at maturity

Common Name	Scientific Name	Height	Spread	Form	Notes
Redbud	<i>Cercis canadensis</i>	20-30'	25-35'	Rounded	Does best as an understory tree, needs supplemental irrigation in full sun
Serviceberry	<u><i>Amelanchier arborea</i></u>	15-25'	10-15'	Upright, multistem	Spring blooming
American Fringetree	<u><i>Chionanthus virginicus</i></u>	12-30'	12'-20'	Rounded	Smaller tree with beautiful white bloom
Carolina Cherry Laurel	<u><i>Prunus caroliniana</i></u>	15-35'	15-20'	Small tree or large shrub	Enormous wildlife value, can be maintained as a hedge

Shrubs

Common Name	Scientific Name	Height	Spread	Habit	Notes
Dwarf Palmetto	<u><i>Sabal minor</i></u>	2-5'	4-6'	Evergreen	Drought, salt tolerant. Provides interesting texture
Adam's Needle	<u><i>Yucca filamentosa</i></u>	2-3'	2-3'	Evergreen	Extremely drought tolerant, colorful cultivars

Dwarf Yaupon Holly	<u><i>Ilex vomitoria</i></u> 'Nana'	4-5'	4-5'	Evergreen	Drought and salt tolerant, dwarf cultivar is more formal in appearance
Dwarf Wax Myrtle	<u><i>Myrica cerifera</i></u> 'Don's Dwarf'	4-6'	4-6'	Evergreen	Tolerates wet and dry sites, salt tolerant, dwarf cultivar
Wax Myrtle	<u><i>Myrica cerifera</i></u>	10-20'	8-10'	Evergreen	Tolerant of wet sites and salt, wildlife value
Inkberry Holly	<u><i>Ilex glabra</i></u> 'Little Gem' and others	4-6'	3-4'	Evergreen	Good substitute for Boxwoods
American Beautyberry	<u><i>Callicarpa americana</i></u>	3-6'	3-6'	Deciduous	Beautiful purple berries in fall, great for wildlife
Yaupon Holly	<u><i>Ilex vomitoria</i></u>	10-20'	8-12'	Evergreen	Red berries in fall, salt and drought tolerant
Carolina Cherry Laurel	<u><i>Prunus caroliniana</i></u>	15-35'	15-20'	Evergreen	Enormous wildlife value, can be kept as a hedge
Red Buckeye	<u><i>Aesculus pavia</i></u>	15-25'	10-20'	Deciduous	Beautiful red flowers favored by hummingbirds
Sweet Pepperbush	<u><i>Clethra alnifolia</i></u>	3-5'	3-5'	Deciduous	Many beautiful cultivars available
Virginia Sweetspire	<u><i>Itea virginica</i></u> 'Henry's Garnet'	5-6'	5-6'	Deciduous	Tolerate a wide variety of soils
Dwarf Chokeberry	<u><i>Aronia melanocarpa</i></u> 'Ground Hug'	1-3'	1-2'	Deciduous	Drought and salt tolerant
Arrowwood Viburnum	<u><i>Viburnum dentatum</i></u> 'Blue Muffin'	5-10'	5-10'	Deciduous	Tolerates a variety of soils, smaller cultivars available
Anise Shrub	<u><i>Illicium floridanum</i></u>	15-20'	10-20'	Evergreen	Moderately drought tolerant, fast growing
Oakleaf Hydrangea	<u><i>Hydrangea quercifolia</i></u>	8-12'	6-8'	Deciduous	May do better with part shade
Possumhaw Holly	<u><i>Ilex decidua</i></u>	7-15'	5-12'	Deciduous	Heat, drought, and soil compaction tolerant

Grasses

Common Name	Scientific Name	Height	Spread	Notes
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Little Bluestem	<u><i>Schizachyrium scoparium</i></u>	1-3'	1-2'	Beautiful cultivars available, 'Heavy Metal'
Muhlygrass	<u><i>Muhlenbergia capillaris</i></u>	2-3'	2-3'	Drought and salt tolerant, looks great planted in masses
Switchgrass	<u><i>Panicum virgatum</i></u>	2-5'	3-4'	Drought and salt spray tolerant
Purple Lovegrass	<u><i>Eragrostis spectabilis</i></u>	~1'	~1'	Does well in sandy soils
Wiregrass	<u><i>Aristida stricta</i></u>	1-2'	1-2'	Beautiful feathery texture

More from Natural Resources

- [Cape Fear Creek Week](#)
- [Pond Management Best Practices](#)
- [Rain Gardens](#)
- [TreeFest Distributes Free Trees to Area Residents](#)

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