

Bursera simaruba: Gumbo Limbo¹

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Introduction

This large semi-evergreen tree, with an open, irregular to rounded crown, may reach 50 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. 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 (Figure 2)

Origin: native to Florida, the West Indies, Central America, and northern portions of South America

UF/IFAS Invasive Assessment Status: native

Uses: deck or patio; shade; specimen; street without sidewalk; parking lot island 100–200 sq. ft.; parking lot island > 200 sq. ft.; tree lawn 4–6 feet wide; tree lawn > 6 ft. wide; urban tolerant; highway median



Figure 1. Full Form - *Bursera simaruba*: gumbo limbo
Credits: UF/IFAS

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Figure 2. Range

Description

Height: 25 to 50 feet
Spread: 25 to 50 feet
Crown uniformity: irregular
Crown shape: round
Crown density: open
Growth rate: moderate
Texture: medium

Foliage

Leaf arrangement: alternate (Figure 3)
Leaf type: odd-pinnately compound; made up of 3-9 leaflets
Leaf margin: entire
Leaf shape: ovate to oblong
Leaf venation: brachidodrome, pinnate



Figure 3. Leaf - *Bursera simaruba*: gumbo limbo
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Leaf type and persistence: semi-evergreen
Leaf blade length: 4 to 8 inches; leaflets are 2 to 4 ½ inches
Leaf color: shiny and green on top, paler green underneath
Fall color: no color change
Fall characteristic: not showy

Flower

Flower color: pale green or white
Flower characteristics: not showy; emerges in clusters on 2-6" long panicles
Flowering: spring



Figure 4. Flower - *Bursera simaruba*: gumbo limbo
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Fruit

Fruit shape: elliptic
Fruit length: ½ inch
Fruit covering: fleshy; drupe-like capsule
Fruit color: red
Fruit characteristics: does not attract wildlife; not showy; fruit/leaves not a litter problem; slightly 3-angled
Fruiting: late spring to early summer, matures the following year



Figure 5. Fruit - *Bursera simaruba*: gumbo limbo
Credits: UF/IFAS

Trunk and Branches

Trunk/branches: branches droop; very showy; typically multi-trunked; no thorns

Bark: reddish orange, orange brown, gray, or silver; smooth; peels off in thin layers or curly strips to reveal olive green beneath; excretes a gray resin when cut, and has a similar aroma to turpentine

Pruning requirement: little required

Breakage: resistant

Current year twig color: green, brown, reddish

Current year twig thickness: medium, thick

Wood specific gravity: unknown

Culture

Light requirement: full sun to partial shade

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

Drought tolerance: high

Aerosol salt tolerance: high



Figure 6. Bark - *Bursera simaruba*: gumbo limbo
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Other

Roots: can form large surface roots

Winter interest: yes

Outstanding tree: yes

Ozone sensitivity: unknown

Verticillium wilt susceptibility: unknown

Pest resistance: free of serious pests and diseases

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 that 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 that 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.

Reference

Koeser, A.K., Friedman, M.H., Hasing, G., Finley, H., Schelb, J. 2017. Trees: South Florida and the Keys. University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences.