



Styax japonica flowers profusely in early summer



A specimen Stryax japonica in full bloom shown here as a large multi-stem

Everyone thinks of spring as the season when trees put on their most colourful and fragrant flowering displays, but there are a few fantastic trees that bloom in the summer.

By Steve McCurdy.

A GOOGLE SEARCH for summer flowering trees, or a trawl through the garden press will certainly leave you feeling spoilt for choice – but do beware! As an experienced nurseryman I must confess my frustration with some ‘armchair’ garden journalists who, in their desire to suggest something unique and unusual, unwittingly recommend trees that are virtually impossible to find, are difficult to grow, or can only be obtained as a tiny whip through the post. If you can find it and are happy to nurture it for ten to forty years, then ‘yes’, theoretically, it could resemble the tree you dreamed of.

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For the majority of readers, however, I can’t help but think it would be far more helpful to promote lesser-known trees which can be widely obtained at reasonable sizes from reputable nurseries. This is not just a self serving notion. Think about it: if a nurseryman is not willing to invest in growing a ‘spectacular’ variety, it

is often because the tree, in practice, is a poor performer. It may have a high failure rate in our climate, may be susceptible to diseases such as fireblight, or just be a weak grower, lacking in vitality. Fortunately, there is really no need to resort to obscurity to find a beautiful summer flowering tree. There are plenty of unusual, little-known summer flowering trees which are well suited to our climate and widely available at good commercial nurseries.

In my travels, I have seen some wonderful specimen trees all over Europe, and each year I find beautiful mature trees to grow-on at our nursery. In doing this I have discovered many unusual trees and been able to observe their performance in our climate. So what summer flowering trees would I recommend? Well, top of the list is *Styax japonica*, otherwise known as the Japanese Snowbell, which is a very beautiful, small tree or large shrub which has showers of white, bell-shaped flowers coating the undersides of the branches, typically in late June. This tree – which comes from the Far East – needs a fair amount of sun and moisture to flower profusely, but is relatively easy to grow and rarely exceeds six to eight metres when fully mature. The foliage is a rich, glossy green which turns yellow or red in the autumn. *Styax* is best planted in an elevated position so that the flowers can be admired from below.



The *Catalpa bignonioides Aurea* shown on the right, pops out of the landscape, whilst a *Gleditsia tr. Sunburst* on the left shows off its striking foliage. Inset: The *Catalpa*'s lovely flowers turn into long, pendulous snake-like pods



The *Liriodendron tulipifera* needs a large garden, but produces a beautiful and unusual tulip shaped flower (inset)

A second is *Catalpa bignonioides*, and especially variety *Catalpa bignonioides Aurea*. Whilst it has a short season in our climate, *Catalpa bignonioides Aurea* makes a dramatic, exotic-looking tree and quickly reaches its maximum height of twelve to 15 metres, although this can be conveniently reduced through pruning. (Smaller *Nana* varieties are available).

Catalpa bignonioides Aurea is a wide-spreading tree, that needs good light, is easy to maintain and is not particularly fussy about its soil

Don't expect to see any leaves until late spring once the temperatures have risen, then enjoy its bright yellow leaves that do slowly darken and will become green before the autumn (though never as green as a regular *Catalpa*). The leaves are very large and heart-shaped and the flowers (white bell-shaped with yellow and purple markings) are displayed in large, open panicles in July and August – they always remind me of a miniature *Cymbidium* flower.

However, the interest doesn't finish there – the tree develops long, slender, pendulous, snake-like brown pods that look wonderful, retaining them well into the winter after all the leaves have gone. The first good frost can knock the leaves off, but this wide-spreading tree, that needs good light, is easy to maintain and is not particularly fussy about its soil. It originates from the south eastern United States where it lives on stream banks and low woodlands, although it doesn't want to sit in water. It also doesn't like an exposed, windy site.

Liriodendron tulipifera (Tulip Tree) is another of my favourite trees. Stately and majestic, it can grow to more than twenty metres tall in this country, so giving it adequate space to develop is critical. It is broadly columnar, but spreading with age and has large-ish lobed, lush, jade green leaves that turn butter yellow in the autumn. First found in the woodlands of the north east of America, you will need at least a fifteen-year-old specimen (although exceptions have been noted) to produce its tulip-shaped flowers that are yellow and green, and banded with orange at the base of the petals. Other cultivars such as *Aureomarginatum* and even a *Fastigiatum* provide more compact specimens for smaller gardens, but are hard to find.

I could go on and on, but I would be remiss not to mention *Aesculus pavia* and also *Aesculus*

parviflora, cousins to the classic conker tree, that both flower freely in July and August. Usually only found as a large shrub they have smaller chestnut-shaped leaves with species 'pavia' having crimson flowers in panicles and 'parviflora' being white with red anthers. Again from the US, whilst not exceeding two-and-a-half metres in height, they are wide-spreading, so will need adequate space to develop.

Other summer flowering trees I would recommend include: *Ailanthus altissima* (Tree of Heaven), *Magnolia grandiflora Galissonnieri* (Evergreen Magnolia), *Robinia pseudoacacia Frisia*, *Koelreuteria paniculata* (Golden Rain Tree), and the *Sophora japonica* (Japanese Pagoda Tree).

For the more daring, I can also recommend *Albizia julibrissin* (Silk Tree) and if you have a sheltered, warm and sunny spot, *Lagerstroemia indica* (Crape Myrtle). Although rather tender for our climate, we do grow them commercially and *Albicias* are certainly popular and delightful. You must be prepared for a bit of dieback after a hard winter, which will require a hard prune, and should hope for, rather than expect, a bloom from your *Lagerstroemia* only after a particularly long and warm summer. ■

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