

Spring Flowering Trees

Published 5/14/19 – Public Domain image titled “Flowering Crabapple Tree in Spring” by Ellen Sholk from PublicDomainPictures.net.

As you travel through our community, it’s obvious that some trees have started flowering. As the spring progresses, we’ll see many trees with white, pink, purple, or red flowers. Most of these trees are fairly small as trees go, but a few can reach well above a two story house’s roof.



Without question, the most common flowering trees are flowering crabapples. Related to fruiting apples, the flowering crabs can come in all colors from white to purple to red. Given proper pruning, which they don’t usually need much of, they retain a fairly circular shape with the height of the tree about the same as the width. Crabs can be pollinators of fruiting apples trees. They’re relatively free from most pest problems and grow easily in our soils and withstand both our hot, dry summers and cold, windy winters. Very few flowering crabs produce fruit, and those that do usually have their fruit eaten by wildlife long before they become a problem for us.

Ornamental pear and plum trees also will be appearing in full bloom within a week or two. Similar in size to flowering crabs, they tend to top out at 20 feet tall. However, these trees have more upright branching patterns thereby making their width about half of their height. They also tend to stay with white or pinkish-red flowers with white being the most common. The flowering crabs and ornamental pears and plums all produce flowers on the ends of twigs and branches in roundish clusters.

Tree lilacs are usually later flowering than the previous and their flowers are produced in distinct cones. That and their definite lilac aroma set them apart from all other ornamental flowering trees. Some varieties of tree lilacs have a nice cone-shaped formed canopy. These are not fruit producing and after flowering will fade into a well formed background green tree.

There are a few flowering trees that I consider to be very under planted in the urban forest, meaning that we should plant more of these trees to increase our city’s tree diversity. Pagoda dogwood, service berry, butterfly magnolia, mountain ash (an ash not at risk to emerald ash borers), eastern redbud, and chokecherry are the smaller species that are very useful and fit well in urban/suburban landscapes. A few of these produce fruit and are relished by the home cook providing they get to the berries before the birds do. Redbuds are especially notable as they flower before much if any leaves are produced and can even flower directly off the trunk of the tree itself.

American lindens, northern catalpas, and purple robe locust are also under planted and are the tallest of the flowering trees that grow well in our area. The linden has a most wonderful aroma and is one of the last flowering trees in our area. Purple robe locusts have small leaflets, similar to honey locusts, which produce a nice dappled shade.

Lastly is one of my personal favorites, the catalpa. We’ll return to the catalpa in a couple of weeks when they are flowering to describe their unique properties and why I put them as one of my top 3 tree species.

Art Smith is a co-owner of East Pierre Landscape and Garden Center, 5400 SD Hwy 34, Pierre