

Conocarpus erectus Buttonwood¹

Edward F. Gilman and Dennis G. Watson²

INTRODUCTION

This low-branching, multi-trunked, shrubby, evergreen tree has glaucous medium-green leaves (Fig. 1). The inconspicuous, small, greenish flowers appear in dense conelike heads in terminal panicles in spring and are followed by 1/2-inch, conelike, red-brown fruits. The dark brown attractive bark is ridged and scaly. The tree is 'clean' with small leaves which fall between the grass blades of the lawn or are easily washed away in the rain.

GENERAL INFORMATION

Scientific name: *Conocarpus erectus*

Pronunciation: kawn-oh-KAR-pus ee-RECK-tus

Common name(s): Buttonwood

Family: *Combretaceae*

USDA hardiness zones: 10B through 11 (Fig. 2)

Origin: native to North America

Uses: Bonsai; hedge; large parking lot islands (> 200 square feet in size); wide tree lawns (>6 feet wide); medium-sized parking lot islands (100-200 square feet in size); medium-sized tree lawns (4-6 feet wide); recommended for buffer strips around parking lots or for median strip plantings in the highway; near a deck or patio; reclamation plant; screen; shade tree; small parking lot islands (< 100 square feet in size); narrow tree lawns (3-4 feet wide); specimen; sidewalk cutout (tree pit); residential street tree; tree has been successfully grown in urban areas where air pollution, poor drainage, compacted soil, and/or drought are common

Availability: generally available in many areas within its hardiness range

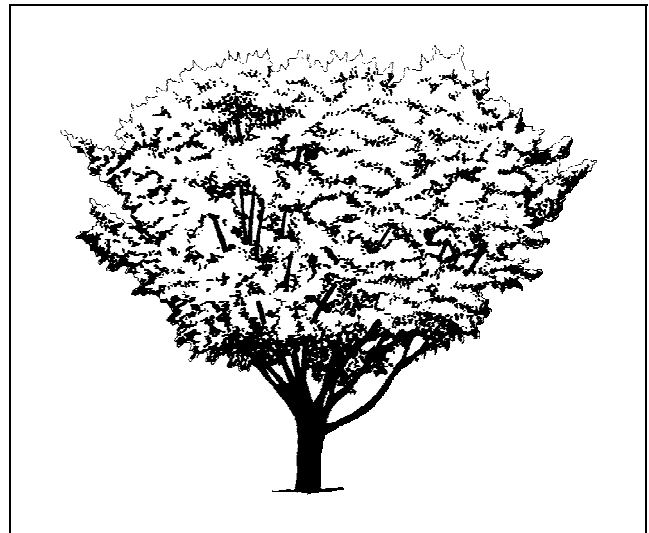


Figure 1. Mature Buttonwood.

DESCRIPTION

Height: 30 to 40 feet

Spread: 20 to 30 feet

Crown uniformity: symmetrical canopy with a regular (or smooth) outline, and individuals have more or less identical crown forms

Crown shape: spreading; vase shape

Crown density: moderate

Growth rate: medium

Texture: fine

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2. Edward F. Gilman, associate professor, Environmental Horticulture Department; Dennis G. Watson, associate professor, Agricultural Engineering Department, Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida, Gainesville FL 32611.



Figure 2. Shaded area represents potential planting range.

Foliage

Leaf arrangement: alternate (Fig. 3)

Leaf type: simple

Leaf margin: entire

Leaf shape: lanceolate; oblong

Leaf venation: pinnate

Leaf type and persistence: evergreen

Leaf blade length: 4 to 8 inches; 2 to 4 inches

Leaf color: green

Fall color: no fall color change

Fall characteristic: not showy

Flower

Flower color: purple; white

Flower characteristics: inconspicuous and not showy; year round flowering

Fruit

Fruit shape: oval

Fruit length: < .5 inch

Fruit covering: dry or hard

Fruit color: brown; red

Fruit characteristics: does not attract wildlife; no significant litter problem; persistent on the tree; showy

Trunk and Branches

Trunk/bark/branches: droop as the tree grows, and will require pruning for vehicular or pedestrian clearance beneath the canopy; routinely grown with, or trainable to be grown with, multiple trunks; showy trunk; tree wants to grow with several trunks but can be trained to grow with a single trunk; no thorns

Pruning requirement: needs little pruning to develop a strong structure

Breakage: resistant

Current year twig color: green

Current year twig thickness: thin

Culture

Light requirement: tree grows in full sun

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

Drought tolerance: high

Aerosol salt tolerance: high

Soil salt tolerance: good



Figure 3. Foliage of Buttonwood.

Other

Roots: surface roots are usually not a problem

Winter interest: no special winter interest

Outstanding tree: not particularly outstanding

Invasive potential: little, if any, potential at this time

Pest resistance: no pests are normally seen on the tree

USE AND MANAGEMENT

Capable of reaching a height of 40 feet with a 20-foot spread, Buttonwood is often seen as a small, somewhat asymmetrical shrub but is ideal for use as a screen, clipped hedge, or specimen planting. The species is less common and grows taller than the Silver Buttonwood. Due to the attractive bark and soft foliage, a multistemmed specimen can make a nice patio or street tree. Planted in the open as a tree, Buttonwood will grow to about 20 to 25 feet tall and wide, and will often take on a picturesque, contorted appearance when exposed to constant seashore winds, creating an attractive specimen. The crown is more symmetrical 1/2 mile or more from the coast or on the inland side of a tall ocean-front building. The wood of Buttonwood was formerly used for firewood, cabinetwork, and charcoal making and is very strong. It is an ideal wood for smoking meats and fish. Included or embedded bark often develops in major branch crotches, but the strong wood appears to compensate for this potential defect. Trees are tough and long-lasting in the landscape.

A Florida native, Buttonwood is ideal for seaside plantings as it is highly tolerant of full sun, sandy soils, and salty conditions. It also tolerates brackish areas and alkaline soils, thriving in the broken shade and wet soils of hammocks. This is a tough tree! It withstands the rigors of urban conditions very well and makes a durable street or parking lot tree. Due to its small size, plant on 15-foot centers to form a closed canopy along a street. Purchase single-trunked trees for street and parking lot plantings.

The cultivar 'Mombo' has a dense crown and may be smaller than the species, 15 to 20 feet tall.

Pests

Sucking insect secretions will result in problems with sooty mold on trees inland from the coast.

Diseases

No diseases are of major concern.