

Under the Linden

by Susan Stager, Fairfax Master Gardener

Germanic mythology tells us that linden trees are dedicated to the goddess of love, Freya, due to their heart-shaped leaves. Teutonic tribes, from 400 BC to 200 AD, held court proceedings under a linden tree, believed to be a place where justice and truth would be revealed, and that the sweetly scented blossoms would encourage lighter sentences.

Native Americans used the inner bark, which is soft and fibrous with a high tensile strength, to make rope and weaving material for basketry. This “bast” led to the American name for the tree, basswood.



photo: Jonathan Damery

Linden tree blooms

A linden tree makes a popular shade and street tree, with a wide canopy, large heart-shaped leaves and fragrant flowers. Found throughout temperate climates, the Latin name or genus is *Tilia*. They are known as lime trees in the United Kingdom and Ireland, as basswood in the Americas and as linden trees in Europe. They grow in USDA Zones 3a to 8b. Fragrant white flowers appear in June. Honey made from the nectar of these flowers is a prized gourmet item. Flowers have also been used to make tea.

The American basswood, *Tilia americana*, grows 2 feet a year, to reach 50 to 70 (15 to 21 m) feet tall at maturity with a 35- to 45-foot (10 to 13 m) spread. It is suitable for parks and other large spaces. The ‘McKsentry’ cultivar is narrower, at 40 feet (12 m) tall, and with a 30-foot (9 m) spread, suitable for more average-sized yards.

Tilia caroliniana thrives in USDA Zones 7 - 9, allowing those in warmer climates to grow this native tree.



photo: University of Missouri Extension

Linden tree form

Littleleaf linden, *Tilia cordata*, is native to Europe, Western Siberia and Iran. There is a cultivar of the little leaf linden called ‘Halka,’ which is more compact, 20 feet tall (6 m) and 15 feet (5 m) wide.

Bigleaf linden, *Tilia platyphyllos*, is native to central and southern Europe and southwestern Asia. Bigleaf linden and littleleaf linden are the parents of the hybrid, *Tilia x europea*, which is used frequently as a street tree.

Silver linden, *Tilia tomentosa*, is a medium/large tree that tolerates heat and drought better than other lindens. The undersides of the leaves are whitish, hence the common name, which are showy when they flutter in the wind.

There are places locally and throughout the world to enjoy these beautiful trees without owning them yourself. World-famous littleleaf linden trees line the wide street called “Unter den Linden” (“Under the Linden”) in Berlin, Germany, since the 16th century. Unter den

Linden features shady pedestrian walkways, leading to the Brandenburg Gate and the site of the former Berlin Wall.

Due to recent prolonged drought and bitter winters, the Berlin linden trees have suffered. As they succumb, there are plans to replace them with trees such as osage, from hot and dry Texas, dawn redwoods, and even our own native redbud. There is a citywide effort called "water the gravel" (Giess den Kiez") for neighbors to water new and existing street trees as part of their aftercare.

Closer to home, a gravel promenade of pleached linden trees, known as Lime Walk, can be enjoyed at The Mount, where the novelist Edith Wharton established this linden tree alle on her property in Lenox, Massachusetts.

An alle is a straight walkway lined on either side with trees, a feature that appears often in European garden design. Shakespeare mentioned "walking in a thick pleached alley in mine orchard" in "Much Ado About Nothing."

Pleaching is a labor-intensive method of interweaving branches and trimming the bottoms of the trees to make a pleasant, shady area to walk under. The late Donald Wyman, horticulturalist at Arnold Arboretum at Harvard University, noted, "Because of the time needed in caring for pleached allees, they are infrequently seen in American gardens, but are often observed in Europe."

Here in Fairfax, we have our own linden trees, adorning Fairfax Circle with their flatly pruned bottom branches. A meditation garden on the campus of George Mason University here in Fairfax features a ring of linden trees.

A 40-foot silver linden on the Virginia Tech campus was nominated as a Virginia Big Tree.

Lindens are not suitable for lumber because the wood is soft and rots easily. However, the soft, straight-grained, and even-textured wood, which does not splinter, lends itself to beautiful woodwork.



Linden in fall

If you are eager to have a shade tree for your suburban yard, know that lindens can be messy, as they are prone to aphids (*Myzocallis tiliae*) that suck up sap from the tree. Their excretion leaves a liquid that is rich in sugar, called honeydew, which coats the linden leaves. This honeydew covers sidewalks, roads, and even cars, and becomes a nuisance. To treat this, either spray with a hose or insecticidal soap in the early morning or the evening, when pollinators are not active. If left untreated, sooty mold will grow, giving the tree a blackish appearance. Japanese beetles are also a common pest for these trees.

References

- [American Basswood](#), Virginia Tech Dendrology
- [Littleleaf Linden, *Tilia cordata*](#), Virginia Cooperative Extension
- [Tilia tomentosa](#), Virginia Big Tree Program
- [Tilia americana](#), Missouri Botanical Garden
- [Linden\(Tilia\): Linden Aphid](#), Washington State University Extension