**Bursera simaruba: Gumbo Limbo**
Edward F. Gilman and Dennis G. Watson

### Introduction

This large semievergreen tree, with an open, irregular to rounded crown, may reach 60-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 gumba 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 (Fig. 2)  
**Origin:** native to North America  
**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  
**Availability:** not native to North America

### Description

**Height:** 25- to 40-feet  
**Spread:** 25- to 40-feet

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**Crown uniformity:** irregular
**Crown shape:** round
**Crown density:** open
**Growth rate:** moderate
**Texture:** medium

**Foliage**
- **Leaf arrangement:** alternate (Fig. 3)
- **Leaf type:** odd-pinnately compound
- **Leaf margin:** entire
- **Leaf shape:** ovate, elliptic (oval)
- **Leaf type and persistence:** semi-evergreen
- **Leaf blade length:** 2- to 4-inches
- **Leaf color:** green
- **Fall color:** no color change
- **Fall characteristic:** not showy

![Figure 3. Foliage](image)

**Flower**
- **Flower color:** green
- **Flower characteristics:** not showy

**Fruit**
- **Fruit shape:** oval
- **Fruit length:** .5- to 1-inch
- **Fruit covering:** fleshy
- **Fruit color:** red
- **Fruit characteristics:** does not attract wildlife; not showy; fruit/leaves not a litter problem

**Trunk and Branches**
- **Trunk/bark/branches:** branches droop; very showy; typically multi-trunked; thorns
- **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, partial sun or partial shade
- **Soil tolerances:** clay; sand; loam; acidic; alkaline; well-drained
- **Drought tolerance:** high
- **Aerosol salt tolerance:** high

**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.