

# Conocarpus erectus var. sericeus: Silver Buttonwood<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

This low-branching, multi-trunked, shrubby, evergreen tree has beautiful silvery leaves due to silky hairs which cover the leaf surface. The inconspicuous, small, greenish flowers appear in dense conelike heads in terminal panicles in spring and are followed by ½-inch, conelike, red-brown fruits. The dark brown attractive bark is ridged and scaly. The leaves are small and fall between the grass blades of the lawn or are easily washed away in the rain.



Figure 1. Full Form—*Conocarpus erectus* var. *sericeus*: Silver buttonwood

## General Information

**Scientific name:** *Conocarpus erectus* var. *sericeus*

**Pronunciation:** kawn-oh-KAR-pus ee-RECK-tus variety suh-RISS-ee-us

**Common name(s):** Silver buttonwood

**Family:** *Combretaceae*

**USDA hardiness zones:** 10B through 11 (Figure 2)

**Origin:** native to Florida, the Caribbean, and South America

**UF/IFAS Invasive Assessment Status:** little invasive potential; not considered a problem species at this time and may be recommended by UF/IFAS faculty (reassess in 10 years)

**Uses:** specimen; street without sidewalk; screen; deck or patio; hedge; reclamation; parking lot island < 100 sq ft; parking lot island 100–200 sq ft; parking lot island > 200 sq ft; sidewalk cutout (tree pit); tree lawn 3–4 feet wide; tree lawn 4–6 feet wide; tree lawn > 6 ft wide; urban tolerant; highway median; bonsai; shade; container or planter

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Figure 2. Range

## Description

**Height:** 15 to 20 feet  
**Spread:** 15 to 20 feet  
**Crown uniformity:** symmetrical  
**Crown shape:** vase, spreading  
**Crown density:** moderate  
**Growth rate:** moderate  
**Texture:** fine

## Foliage

**Leaf arrangement:** alternate  
**Leaf type:** simple  
**Leaf margin:** entire  
**Leaf shape:** lanceolate, oblong  
**Leaf venation:** pinnate  
**Leaf type and persistence:** evergreen  
**Leaf blade length:** 2 to 4 inches  
**Leaf color:** blue-green to silvery gray  
**Fall color:** no color change  
**Fall characteristic:** not showy



Figure 3. Leaf—*Conocarpus erectus* var. *sericeus*: Silver buttonwood

## Flower

**Flower color:** white  
**Flower characteristics:** not showy  
**Flowering:** year-round

## Fruit

**Fruit shape:** round  
**Fruit length:** < ½ inch  
**Fruit covering:** dry or hard  
**Fruit color:** purple-brown to red-brown  
**Fruit characteristics:** does not attract wildlife; showy; fruit/leaves not a litter problem  
**Fruiting:** year-round



Figure 4. Fruit—*Conocarpus erectus* var. *sericeus*: Silver buttonwood

## Trunk and Branches

**Trunk/branches:** branches droop; showy; typically multi-trunked; no thorns  
**Bark:** dark brown, rigid, and scaly  
**Pruning requirement:** needed for strong structure  
**Breakage:** resistant  
**Current year twig color:** green, gray  
**Current year twig thickness:** thin  
**Wood specific gravity:** unknown

## Culture

**Light requirement:** full sun to partial shade  
**Soil tolerances:** clay; sand; loam; alkaline; acidic; occasionally wet; well-drained  
**Drought tolerance:** high  
**Aerosol salt tolerance:** high



Figure 5. Bark—*Conocarpus erectus* var. *sericeus*: Silver buttonwood  
Credits: Gritta Hasing

## Other

**Roots:** not a problem

**Winter interest:** no

**Outstanding tree:** yes

**Ozone sensitivity:** unknown

**Verticillium wilt susceptibility:** unknown

**Pest resistance:** free of serious pests and diseases

## Use and Management

Capable of reaching a height of 40 feet with a 20-foot spread, silver buttonwood is often seen as a small, somewhat asymmetrical shrub but is ideal for use as a screen, clipped hedge, or specimen planting. Due to the attractive bark and soft foliage, a multi-stemmed specimen can make a nice patio or street tree. Planted in the open as a tree, silver buttonwood will grow to about 15 to 20 feet tall and will often take on a picturesque, contorted appearance when exposed to constant seashore winds, creating an attractive specimen. The crown is more symmetrical  $\frac{1}{2}$  mile or more from the coast or on the inland side of a tall ocean-front building. The wood of silver buttonwood was formerly used for firewood, cabinetwork, and charcoal making and is very strong. It is an ideal wood for smoking meats and fish.

A Florida native, silver 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. *Conocarpus erectus* (buttonwood) has green leaves and is a somewhat larger tree with a vase-like shape. Some sources lump the two trees together as *Conocarpus erectus*.

Propagation of silver buttonwood is by seed.

## Pests

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

## Diseases

No diseases are of major concern.

## References

Koeser, A. K., Hasing, G., Friedman, M. H., and Irving, R. B. 2015. *Trees: North & Central Florida*. Gainesville: University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences.

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