

# Conocarpus erectus: Buttonwood<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

This low-branching, multi-trunked, shrubby, evergreen tree has glaucous medium-green leaves. The inconspicuous, small, greenish flowers appear in dense cone-like heads in terminal panicles in spring and are followed by 1/2-inch, cone-like, 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.



Figure 1. Full Form—*Conocarpus erectus*: Buttonwood

## 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 (Figure 2)

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

**UF/IFAS Invasive Assessment Status:** native

**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

## Description

**Height:** 30 to 45 feet

**Spread:** 20 to 30 feet

**Crown uniformity:** symmetrical

**Crown shape:** vase, spreading

**Crown density:** moderate

**Growth rate:** moderate

**Texture:** fine

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Figure 2. Range

## 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:** 1 to 4 inches

**Leaf color:** dark green and smooth

**Fall color:** no color change

**Fall characteristic:** not showy



Figure 3. Leaf—*Conocarpus erectus*: Buttonwood

## Flower

**Flower color:** green

**Flower characteristics:** not showy; emerge in clusters on round, compact heads that are arranged on branched panicles

**Flowering:** spring to early fall



Figure 4. Flower—*Conocarpus erectus*: Buttonwood

## Fruit

**Fruit shape:** round

**Fruit length:** ½ inch

**Fruit covering:** dry or hard

**Fruit color:** purple-brown, red

**Fruit characteristics:** does not attract wildlife; showy; fruit/leaves not a litter problem

**Fruiting:** year-round



Figure 5. Fruit—*Conocarpus erectus*: Buttonwood



## Trunk and Branches

**Trunk/branches:** branches droop; showy; typically multi-trunked; no thorns

**Bark:** gray and smooth, becoming scaly, fissured, and darker with age

**Pruning requirement:** needed for strong structure

**Breakage:** resistant

**Current year twig color:** green

**Current year twig thickness:** thin

**Wood specific gravity:** unknown



Figure 6. Bark—*Conocarpus erectus*: Buttonwood

Credits: Gritta Hasing

## Culture

**Light requirement:** full sun

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

**Drought tolerance:** high

**Aerosol salt tolerance:** high

## Other

**Roots:** not a problem

**Winter interest:** no

**Outstanding tree:** no

**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, 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 multi-stemmed 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 ½ 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.

## Reference

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.