

STUMPS TO stars

Cutting off the main stem of a tree may seem like horticultural vandalism, but pollarding the right plant produces dramatic effects

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Pollarding is an ancient pruning technique, used from prehistoric times to produce wood and fodder. Certain trees, such as willow and ash, were decapitated at about 2m (6½ft) tall; the new shoots that sprouted, above the reach of browsing animals, were harvested every few years.

Pollarding is different from coppicing, which requires the plants to be cut down to ground level. Nowadays many ornamental trees and shrubs are pollarded to create spectacular decorative effects, including larger leaves and lush, brightly coloured foliage. As well as producing interesting new growth, this technique restricts the plants' size, which means they can be grown in smaller spaces.

RHS Garden Wisley's famous Mixed Borders make good use of pollarded trees and shrubs. There, *Catalpa*, *Paulownia* and *Sambucus* act as foils for showy herbaceous plants while also providing height and structure. In summer, intense acid-yellow *Catalpa* leaves contrast with vivid blue delphiniums. Even in winter, when the border is largely dormant, the gnarled, twisted stems of the pollarded *Paulownia* provide interest.

Making the cut

It is best to pollard young trees or shrubs rather than older specimens. Establish plants in a suitable location for around three years before cutting. In late winter or early spring use a sharp pruning saw to cut across the main stem (or stems) at a suitable height – anywhere between 0.5–2m (1½–6½ft). Taller pollards are useful at the back of a border. Angle the cut slightly to disperse water from the stem, and remove any lower sideshoots. New growth will sprout from near the pruning point.

Not all deciduous trees and shrubs are suitable for pollarding. Choose those having good disease resistance and high vigour, which are thus able to cope with regular pruning. Once trees have been pollarded, continue doing so annually, or at least every few years. Pollarded trees left unpruned for any length of time can produce overlong, weak and potentially dangerous stems. Here are profiles of five plants with ornamental foliage suitable for pollarding, and on p56 are some further plant suggestions to try. ●

Sambucus

Elders respond well to pollarding, becoming smaller, more-upright plants, with larger, lush, better-coloured foliage, often elegantly dissected, depending on cultivar.

❖ **Selections to choose:** although often regarded as shrubby weeds, there are some highly ornamental *Sambucus* (elder) with purple or gold foliage. One good example is *Sambucus nigra* f. *porphyrophylla* 'Eva', with its dark, lacyly dissected foliage. Elegant 'Guincho Purple', named after Guincho Gardens in Co. Down, Northern Ireland, has bolder, bronze-purple dissected foliage followed in summer by unusual tufts of bright green leaves. Its flower petals are tinged pink, although flowering with all selections is reduced if pollarded. For dazzling gold foliage, try *S. racemosa* 'Sutherland Gold'.

❖ **Use and how to grow:** kept as a pollard, these plants produce lush foliage. Bronzy-purple selections look great with red-flowered herbaceous plants, such as monarda and *Lychnis chalcedonica*. Once the shrub is established, cut back its branches in March to a central framework at the required height. Each following spring cut new shoots back to within a few centimetres of the previous year's growth. Grow in full sun for the best colour, but also suits partial shade.



GWJ / ADRIAN JAMES

Sambucus nigra f. *porphyrophylla* 'Eva'



CLIVE NICHOLS

Sambucus racemosa 'Sutherland Gold'



GAP / FELIKE BOROWSKI

Pollarding *Catalpa bignonioides* 'Aurea' makes it suitable for a mixed border.

Catalpa bignonioides 'Aurea' showing fresh growth in May after pollarding in early spring.

RHS / TIM SANDALL

Catalpa

Indian bean trees become more shrubby when pollarded, with large, strongly coloured foliage.

❖ **Selections to choose:** catalpas are trees, flowering in late summer, with long, decorative bean-like pods. When pollarded, these features are lost, but the larger leaves gained thereby are impressive. Golden *Catalpa bignonioides* 'Aurea' will provide strong contrast with surrounding herbaceous plants. Its foliage is effective with *Echinops bannaticus* 'Taplow Blue', fiery red crocosmia and *Geranium palmatum*. Purple *Catalpa x erubescens* 'Purpurea' (inset), with new leaves that are almost black, is dramatic alongside fiery-flowered herbaceous plants.

❖ **Use and how to grow:** pollard in late winter to around 0.5m–1.5m (1½–5ft). Cut back the new growth each following spring to within a few centimetres of the pollarded stems. Plant in any well-drained soil, ideally deep, moist loam. They like a sunny, sheltered spot.



RHS / GRAHAM TITCHMARSH

Populus

Pollarded poplars produce vigorous shoots with larger leaves and good colour.

❖ **Selections to choose:** when pollarded, unusual *Populus deltoides* 'Purple Tower' produces new shoots with large, glossy, red to deep purple leaves on red stems speckled with beige. The leaves also have beautiful red veins when young and provide good autumn colour. They are particularly effective when combined with silver-leaved shrubs. Gold-leaved *Populus alba* 'Richardii' can also be pollarded; its foliage is smaller but the yellow leaves have a silvery underside. Plants may sucker.

❖ **Use and how to grow:** these plants like full sun or partial shade and prefer moist conditions but can tolerate dry soils. Plants have vigorous roots: do not plant by houses or drains. Once established, pollard yearly in spring, to around 0.5–1.5m (1½–5ft).



TGC / I/P / NOVA PHOTOGRAPHY



RHS / TIM SANDALL

Populus alba 'Richardii'

Populus deltoides 'Purple Tower'



Paulownia tomentosa

Pollarded foxglove trees have vast leaves on vigorous shoots.

❖ **Use:** After pollarding, fast-growing *Paulownia tomentosa* will produce leaves up to 60cm (24in) across and new stems 2.5m (8ft) or more high. Great for architectural structure and exotic plantings.

❖ **How to grow:** choose a sheltered position in sun or partial shade in deep, rich, well-drained soil. Cut stems to the required height; prune new growth each spring to within a few centimetres of the original cuts.

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Eucalyptus

Pollarding gum trees restricts their size and encourages fresh, juvenile foliage.

❖ **Use:** *Eucalyptus gunnii* can grow to 30m (100ft) in their native Tasmania, but pollarding produces shorter plants with distinctive, rounded, blue juvenile leaves, then narrower mature leaves. Plantsman Christopher Lloyd (see p19) used it with purple *Cotinus coggygria* and berberis to spectacular effect. Other species can also be pollarded.

❖ **How to grow:** eucalyptus will grow in most soils. They like full sun but not strong cold winds. Pollard in late spring to around 45cm (1½ft), then prune each following spring.



GAP / JONATHAN BUCKLEY

More plants to pollard

Toona sinensis 'Flamingo'

Tree with vibrant pink spring foliage; pollarded plants kept compact for use in borders. Do not cut until well established.



Liriodendron tulipifera 'Aureomarginatum'

Once established, tulip trees can be pollarded, to make the most of their unusually shaped leaves close to eye level.



Acer negundo 'Kelly's Gold'

Pollarding ensures this tree's dazzling leaf colour is seen to best advantage. Foliage and growth remains fairly compact.



Cotinus coggygria 'Royal Purple'

By pollarding this vigorous shrub the overall plant size is reduced, while lush, larger-leaved, richly coloured shoots abound.



Tilia tomentosa

Pollarded, this tree can be grown as a shrub with large, green, heart-shaped leaves, silvery beneath, and fewer of its scented flowers, narcotic to bees.



Others to try

Some trees and shrubs worth considering for pollarding include:

- ❖ *Acer negundo* 'Flamingo'
- ❖ *Acer pensylvanicum* 'Erythrocladum'
- ❖ *Ailanthus altissima* (may sucker)
- ❖ *Aralia elata*
- ❖ *Cercis siliquastrum*
- ❖ *Corylus maxima* 'Purpurea'
- ❖ *Eucalyptus globulus* (tender)
- ❖ *Liquidambar styraciflua* 'Worplesdon'
- ❖ *Populus x jackii* 'Aurora' (may sucker)

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