

# Punctuating the Skyline: Alternatives to the Lombardy

*Karen Madsen*

Tree-experts may warn me that they are liable to borers and bark-lice, and that they lose their leaves early in the season, and in many ways invite the use of the axe. It may be so. I have enjoyed them, however, for a number of years and they are entirely healthy yet, although surely a score of years in age. It will be a long time, therefore, before an axe under my direction will touch them. Even the tendency to lose their leaves early in the season would not induce me to use the axe, for their lofty spire-like forms dominate everything and establish that variety of skyline so much to be desired by the lawn-planter. Let the limbs be bare and the trunk scarred and seamed with borers, the noble outline is there . . . Samuel Parsons (1891)

More than a hundred years later, there remain “lawn-planters” who stand with the nineteenth-century superintendent of New York City Parks on this issue—dedicated, as he was, to the proposition that the Lombardy poplar offers qualities not available in other trees. For these steadfast few, “the noble outline,” the fast growth, sublime height, and sinuous leaf movement are irreplaceable and irresistible, more than offsetting a short life made shorter still by canker. In the face of all odds, they continue to plant the Lombardy. But for those whose commitment to the problem-ridden Lombardy falls short of Mr. Parsons’, there are other fastigate trees that are worthy of consideration for specific situations.

## ***Populus sp.***

The Lombardy hadn’t been long in cultivation when one special quality was noted by William Gilpin (1791), that is, “the waving line it forms when agitated by the wind. Most trees, in this circumstance, are partially agitated: one side is in rest, while the other is in motion. But the Italian poplar waves in one simple sweep from the top to the bottom, like an ostrich feather on a lady’s head.” All poplars have the flattened leafstalk that makes the Lombardy’s blade so responsive to the wind, and thus another poplar is a logical choice to replicate its movement and sound. *Populus tremulus* ‘*Erecta*’ (upright European aspen) or

*P. alba* ‘*Pyramidalis*’ (Bolleana or fastigate white poplar) are candidates, although not free of problems themselves. The latter can be seen on the Charles River Esplanade in Boston. Very like the Lombardy in habit (although rather wider in proportion to its height), it can be recognized in summer by the cottony white of the underside of its leaves. It is easily propagated, but does not grow as fast as the Lombardy nor quite so high. Like many fastigates, which concentrate their resources on growing upright instead of spreading, it tends to become bare at the base.

## ***Quercus robur* ‘Fastigiata’ (Upright English Oak)**

Nearly all long-cultivated trees have deviated into erect-growing—as well as weeping—forms, and among them is the oak, emblem of strength and longevity. The upright English oak is large and imposing; a mature tree may be sixty feet or more in height with a span of only ten to fifteen feet. When leafless, it greatly resembles the Lombardy in form. It has the advantage of being longer-lived and freer from insect attack, although mildew can be a serious problem.

Since oaks are relatively difficult to propagate vegetatively, cultivated specimens are generally grown from seed, which creates the possibility of wide variation in form. Most seedlings—as many as eighty or ninety percent



*Populus alba 'Pyramidalis' rises like a vertical spire from a horizontal line of trees on the Charles River Esplanade, Boston, giving contrast to a weeping willow and providing the exclamation point in a composition of rounded trees. All photos by the author.*

according to Dirr—do acquire the columnar habit of the parent. Specimens that grow true to form approach the Lombardy in outline and effect.

***Fagus sylvatica 'Fastigiata'*  
(Fastigate or Dawyck Beech)**

The fastigate beech shares the grace and majesty of its parent species, as well as its beauty, especially when twigs take on a purplish tinge in the spring sunlight and the shapely buds have begun to expand but are still enclosed in their delicate, bronzy carapaces. It is also true to the species in its glossy foliage, smooth gray bark, and fibrous roots. The fastigate cultivar can attain eighty feet.

Dense and amenable to shearing, it makes an admirable hedge, screen, or wall. Its breadth is greater than the Lombardy's or the upright

oak's, and its density gives it a bushier form than either. The fastigate beech seen in a photo to the right is one of three that stand in a sunken garden in Boston's Back Bay. Now fifty years old, they have broadened to a pear shape; with age, side shoots tend to come off the main branches and to splay out, especially with the weight of rain. In the past few years, the lower third of these trees have been pruned.

***Acer rubrum 'Armstrong'*  
(Armstrong Red Maple)**

Both 'Armstrong' and *A. rubrum* 'Columnare' are grown at the Arnold, but here it is the Armstrong that is more nearly upright. Fast growers (as much as twelve feet in five to seven years according to Dirr) and moderately weak-wooded, they can attain seventy or more feet in height, gradually spreading out over



*Quercus robur* 'Fastigiata' (upright English oak) in Weston, Massachusetts.



*Fagus sylvatica* *Fastigiata* (fastigate or Dawyk beech) on Marlborough Street, Boston.



*Acer rubrum* 'Armstrong' (Armstrong red maple) at the Arnold Arboretum.



*Carpinus betulus* 'Columnaris' (the Schmoor hornbeam) at the Arnold Arboretum.



*Carpinus betulus* 'Columnaris' among other *Carpinus* at the Arnold Arboretum.

time from an initial width of about fifteen feet. They share the early spring flowers, lovely silver-gray bark, and fall color of their species. The Armstrong serves well as an avenue tree, especially in crowded urban conditions.

***Carpinus betulus* 'Columnaris'**  
**(Columnar Hornbeam)**

The sheltering qualities of the Lombardy are more than equally supplied by the columnar hornbeam (or the "Shmoo," as it is affectionately known at the Arnold). If the height of this relatively small (forty to sixty feet) and

narrow tree is too great, the plant accepts pruning very well. However, its dense habit is by itself so neat that it looks naturally as though it had been sheared. With its impenetrable branches, the columnar hornbeam makes a superb hedge, and as a sheltering screen it is hard to beat. Its very erect branches take a slender spire-like form when young, later approaching the oval, but always very striking and elegant.

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**Acknowledgements**

Thanks for arboricultural advice are due Phyllis Andersen, Peter Del Tredici, and Gary Koller and to Mary Jane Kaplan for literary advice.

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Karen Madsen is editor of *Arnoldia*.