



Japanese Maple (*Acer palmatum*)

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Summary

Foliage: Deciduous broadleaf. Foliage color, depending on cultivar, varies from green to red to purple to a marble pattern composed of varying combinations of white, pink and shades of green. Foliage shape can vary from the “normal” looking leaf to dissected (leaves with very thin lobes often referred to a “cut leaf” forms). Dissected leaves impart a very lacy look and fine texture to plants. Spring and fall foliage colors are quite vibrant and can be bright red, yellow, chartreuse, or maroon. Red-leaved cultivars will have green leaves if grown in the shade.

Height: 12 to 25 feet (depending on cultivar)

Spread: 10 to 25 feet (depending on cultivar)

Shape: Most cultivars are upright. *Acer palmatum* var. *dissectum* cultivars have an irregular branching habit, cascading branches, and are slower growing than the species

Japanese maple is a small tree (usually less than 25 feet tall) with a fine texture and year round appeal. The combination of its showy spring, summer and fall foliage, smooth bark, and interesting form make it suitable for specimen tree status. There are hundreds of cultivars of this species with different foliage types, forms, sizes, and bark characteristics.

Plant Needs

Zone: 5 to 8 (check with local garden centers or botanical gardens for cultivars suitable for your area)

Light: Partial shade to full sun

Moisture: Moist to average (avoid sites with soil that is characteristically dry)

Soil Type: Sandy, loam, or clay loam

pH Range: 3.7 to 6.8

Functions

Suggested uses for this plant include specimen plant and for areas where a small tree is desired.

Planting Notes

Performs best with rich, moist soil conditions in partially shaded locations. Do not plant in dry or windy sites. Some cultivars do well in full sun while others require afternoon shade. This aspect will vary depending on your location. Check with garden center personnel in your area to determine the cultivars that are suitable for your location/exposure.

Care

Easy to maintain. When placed in right location requires little care.

Keep soil moist during summer, especially in the Tidewater area. During dry periods, water deeply (top 12 inches of soil) by placing hose within the drip line of tree and letting water trickle into the soil.

Mulch around base of tree to drip line.

Problems

Plants may leaf out in early spring in response to periods of unseasonably high temperatures. Subsequent low temperatures can significantly damage foliage. Warm/cold fluctuations in the spring of 2007 resulted in significant damage to a large proportion of Japanese maples.

Leaf scorch (browning of leaf margin) is common when plants do not receive adequate water or are in windy areas.

Aphids can be a problem on new growth. Chewing insects create occasional problems.

Alternatives

Consult garden centers, historic or public gardens and arboreta, regarding cultivars and related species that are suited to your area.

Full moon maple, *Acer japonicum*, is a lesser known and occasionally available small tree species that is similar to Japanese maple but has larger leaves; hence it has a bolder texture. Full moon maple has a no less than spectacular red/orange/burgundy fall foliage color depending on cultivar.

Cultivars of *Acer palmatum*

There are hundreds of cultivars of Japanese maples. Cultivar characteristics are tree size and habit, leaf shape and color (spring, growing season and fall), and bark characteristics. 'Bloodgood' holds its red leaf color better than others.

'Dissectum Atropurpureum' is compact and slow growing. It has finely cut leaves which are deep red. Leaf color fades in time.

'Osakazuki' has large green leaves that turn bright red in the fall.

'Sango Kaku' has young stems that turn bright red in the winter. Fall foliage color is a very bright orange-yellow.

Comments

Japanese maple is valued for its form, smooth bark, spring, summer, and fall foliage colors, leaf shape, and fine texture. Because of these attributes, this tree species has showy characteristics throughout the year and is commonly used as a specimen plant (has sufficient attributes to feature plant as a focal point in the landscape). There are hundreds of cultivars. Japanese maples are relatively expensive because all cultivars are propagated by grafting.

Most cultivars at maturity are small trees (less than 25 feet tall). Dissectum types (foliage is very lacy) are slow-growing (less than 12 inches per year) and are usually less than 15 feet tall at maturity. In addition, their cascading branch habit imparts a very graceful look to the tree. In advance of purchasing a Japanese maple, one should investigate the many cultivars to determine the traits that are desired. Trees grown from seed will generally not exhibit the cultivar characteristic of the parent. Red leaf cultivars will have green leaves if sited in a shady location.

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