

Acer palmatum - Japanese Maple (*Aceraceae*)

Acer palmatum is the quintessential small, deciduous tree of Japanese gardens. Refined and delicate, it is one of the finest, most exquisite small trees for texture, form, foliage, and autumn color.

FEATURES

Form

-small ornamental tree



-the species form may mature at 20' tall x 20' wide, but the numerous cultivars are always much smaller
-growth habit is variable - from upright-rounded, horizontal-vased,

or weeping-pendulous, depending upon cultivar, and often becoming densely twiggy with age

-slow growth rate

Culture

-full sun to full shade, but usually best in partial sun to partial shade

-prefers rich, moist, well-drained, slightly acidic soils, but is only moderately adaptable to more adverse conditions, but particularly sensitive to drought and heat

-propagated by cuttings grafted onto rootstock, rooted stem cuttings, or seeds

-prone to several diseases, including Verticillium wilt, stem cankers, and pests (including cosmetic leaf damage from Japanese beetles); also prone to seasonal leaf scorch that occurs with drought

-abundantly available, in both container and B&B forms, with many cultivars

-the shallow and fibrous root system quickly regenerates and spreads upon transplanting, but is subject to drought stress, even in established trees sometimes prone to winter dieback at the stem tips or frost damage in early spring

Foliage

-opposite arrangement; with green, bronzed, red, or purple emergent leaves, depending upon cultivar

-each of the 5 to 11 (often 7) lobes is narrow, serrated, and with a pointed end

-prominent palmate venation

-autumn color may be pale yellowish-green, vivid orange, brick red, or fluorescent flaming red, depending upon cultivar and sun exposure



Flowers

-clusters of red to purplish inflorescences in late May and early June are often hidden by the foliage

Fruits



-2 samaras per stalk having incurved wings, in pendulous clusters from the stems, often becoming red by June and July, and maturing to reddish-brown in Oct., but often sparsely borne or abscised by this point

Twigs

-green, brown, red, or purplish, depending upon cultivar, with the winter buds almost valvate

Trunk

-the specimen may be single-trunked and branching

low, grafted onto a single-trunked standard, or multi-trunked

-green bark when young for green-foliaged types, otherwise brown bark for red-foliaged types and eventually turning to brown-gray for all types

USAGE

Function

-focal point, specimen, foundation, entranceway, or raised planter small tree

Texture

-fine texture in foliage and when bare

-thick density in foliage and when bare (except in youth, when it is much more open, or very old age, when some forms may become open again)

Assets

-many cultivars are available that differ in foliage color, cutleaf character, and growth habit

-layered branching and dense twiggy texture contribute to the ultra-fine texture with age

-generally adaptable to shady conditions or sunny locations

-usually has vibrant autumn color

Liabilities

-slow growth

-expensive (resulting from slow growth rate at the nursery, and high demand)

-occasional dieback or cosmetic damage may occur due to various pests, diseases, stresses, winter freezes, or spring frost damage

Habitat

-Zones 5 to 8

-Native to Japan

SELECTIONS

Alternates

-specimen small trees (*Acer pensylvanicum*, *Cornus asperfolia* var. *drummondii* [tree form], *Crataegus viridis* 'Winter King', *Viburnum lentago* [tree form], etc.)

-red-foliaged small trees or large shrubs (*Malus* 'Prairifire', *Malus* 'Purple Prince', *Prunus* x *cistena* 'Big Cis', *Prunus cerasifera* 'Mount St. Helens', etc.)

-small trees or large shrubs with good autumn color, ornamental branching, and relatively fine texture (*Euonymus alatus* 'Compactus', *Parrotia persica* [tree form], *Viburnum prunifolium* [tree form], etc.)

Cultivars - Variants - Related species

-many Japanese Maple cultivars have crimson-red-purple foliage in spring (most turn to green-purple or bronze in summer), deeply cut leaves (dissected types), are dwarfs, or have a combination of these traits; some are pendulous to cascading, and all are slow-growing and fine-textured; two representative cultivars that are common are noted below, although many more exist:
-*Acer palmatum* 'Bloodgood' - best for holding its red-purple foliage color all spring and summer when placed in full sun, lightening to a vibrant red-orange in autumn, and maturing to 15' x 15'

-*Acer palmatum* var. *dissectum atropurpureum* - dissected foliage is dark red when new, fading to bronze by late summer, having a mounding and twisting habit with bright orange autumn color, maturing at 8' x 10'. One of the more hardy cultivars.