Cercis canadensis is a popular, small, ornamental tree. Redbud assets include lavender-pink spring flowers, youthful rapid growth and vased growth habit, somewhat ornamental bark, and picturesque branching character with age. These assets are contrasted with its tendency to have a short functional service life of about 15 years in many urban landscapes.

FEATURES

Form
- small deciduous ornamental tree
  - often maturing at 15' tall x 15' wide, but can become twice as large under optimum conditions
  - if grown in an open area, it has an upright-vased growth habit in youth, becoming spreading rounded to irregularly-shaped and often leaning with age; however, it is often found with a highly irregular shape in forests and woodlands
  - rapid growth rate in youth, slowing down to medium growth rate after about 10 years

Culture
- full sun to partial shade
- prefers and needs a moist, rich, well-drained soil in partial sun to partial shade for long-term optimum performance, but is somewhat adaptable to many types of soils, soil pHs, and moderately stressful situations (except wet sites, which make it more prone to Verticillium wilt)
  - the species form is propagated by seeds, while the cultivars are usually budded onto seedling understock
  - several disease problems, most prominently, trunk canker, which causes individual branches or sections of the tree to die and often leads to an overall decline, and also Verticillium wilt, which also leads to canopy dieback and often a slow death of the tree; scales are a fairly common pest problem
  - abundantly available in B&B form

Foliage
- alternate, broadly heart-shaped leaves with cordate bases, entire margins and prominent palmate venation
  - medium green, slowly turning to dark green, about 4" long x 4" wide
  - autumn color is often yellowish green, light green and yellow; on rare occasions can be bright yellow

Flowers
- small, clustered, sessile dark brown floral buds swell to purple-lavender buds in early spring, slowly opening to pink-lavender flowers, prominently displayed in Apr. before the foliage emerges and persistent for 2-3 weeks
  - flowers may be directly on the trunk or branches, but most are on two-year-old wood

Fruits
- flattened green pods (like sugar peas) change to brown pods containing small black seeds; in clusters on the twigs
  - dried fruits may persist for over one year, but heavy fruit crops do not occur every year

Twigs
- zigzag stems are lenticeled and dark brown (sometimes with subtle shades of purple or red)
- vegetative lateral buds are small and purple-brown, while floral buds are slightly more plump and in clusters along stems, branches, and trunks
- terminal vegetative bud is absent

Trunk
- either single-trunked and low-branching, or multi-trunked
- exterior bark is brown-gray in thin exfoliating strips or thin fissured plates in youth, becoming crisscrossing and raised with age, while the cinnamon-orange interior bark reveals itself with age, for an overall ornamental bark character
- trunks are often twisting, leaning, and decaying with age

USAGE

Function
- foundation, specimen, entranceway, group planting, woodland edge, naturalization, or spring accent tree

Texture
- medium texture in foliage and when bare
- thick density in foliage and average density when bare

Assets
- striking floral display in Apr. before the foliage emerges
- rapid growth in youth yields a quick ornamental tree
- ornamental bark with age
- vased growth habit in youth (V-shaped outline)

Liabilities
- often has a functional life of 10-20 yrs. in urban landscapes due to a combination of urban stresses, diseases, and pests
- prone to trunk canker, Verticillium wilt, and scales, the first two of which can be slowly fatal
- trunk rot with age
- prone to storm damage with age
- poor autumn color

Habitat
- Zones 4 to 9
- Native to the Eastern and Midwestern U.S.

SELECTIONS

Alternates
- early-flowering ornamental trees (Amelanchier, Cornus mas, Cornus florida, Halesia tetraptera, etc.)
- vase-shaped trees (Cornus kousa, Prunus serrulata, Ulmus americana 'Delaware #2', Zelkova serrata, etc.)
- small trees with ornamental bark (Chionanthus retusus, Cornus kousa, Parrotia persica, Stewartia ovata, etc.)

Variants
- Cercis canadensis 'Alba' (var. alba) - white flowers, providing an effective contrast when planted with the species form (moderate availability); 'Royal White' is a more floriferous cultivar
- Cercis canadensis 'Forest Pansy' - new foliage emerges red-purple, becoming bronzed to dark green in summer, with darker lavender flowers in spring, zones 6 to 9 (low availability)
- Cercis canadensis 'Covey' – a weeping form introduced by Brotzman’s Nursery; very attractive