

## JAPANESE MAPLES

By Richard Aubert

They're in all the photos of almost every garden magazine and book you've picked up in the last few years. They come in amazing colors burgundy, gold, plum, orange and green. You want one!!

You're going through the garden center, you spy these great looking small trees and shrubs with amazing lacy foliage, some weeping, some upright. There they are. They complete that amazing look you always find in photos of great gardens. They are exotic. You grab the tag – *Acer palmatum dissectum* 'inabe shidare'.

Great, you look at the growing info, zone 5 –6, and 'no guarantee'. Uh oh!! Then you see the price, UH OH!! ... But this plant is so amazing looking!! OK, OK, well they don't give them away, but they are worth it when you do grow them. They're expensive, because they are quite slow growing like evergreens. So it takes a while to grow that little tree. They are not big maple trees, maybe 8 to 15 feet in as many years. But boy oh boy! Are they ever nice!! They can be perfect, natural garden bonsai.

Now for the zones, so many people will say they are not hardy in Ottawa (zone 5). But it's just not true; you just have to know what you're doing and how to plant them and pick the hardier varieties.

Often I'll see this little Japanese maple, planted in a hole in the lawn one year, and gone the next. At the lower zones, they will stay on the smaller size and there may be some tip dieback in some winters, but I just call it, self-pruning. That's a small price to pay to have these beautiful small trees in the garden.

Not all varieties are hardy for this area but many are. I know I've killed a few, (god if my wife really knew the dollars spent). I have killed off all the beautiful variegated types, those with pink, white & green all in the same leaf. Even people in Toronto (zone 6) say they are not very hardy.

I have heard that zone 3 and 4 gardeners grow Japanese maples in pots and put them in unheated garages or cold cellars for the winter. I think this will be my next trial for variegated types.

They still need cold, they can handle –20c, but not too much of –20 to –30c. Ottawa does not get too many long periods of –20. Windchill doesn't count, that's something only humans feel, trees don't. They might suffer though, if planted in a spot that gets constant strong winds. That is more of a problem for those who garden in the country on open land, not us city folks on our postage stamp properties.

There is a winter fleece wrap, which looks like white polyester sweatshirt fabric, sometimes known as Arbotex. It is available at most garden centers. It can add one whole zone of protection in winter.

I spoke to someone lately in Winnipeg (what's that??? zone 2or 3!!! Poor guys), who grows one with lots of mulch and then shovels snow on it in the winter and it's fine. I told him about the fleece wrap.

It doesn't seem to be the real cold, but the length of cold periods, that may kill them back. Last year had lower temps than 2003, but the cold periods were longer in 2003, thus more winter kill damage. Regardless, Japanese maples are very resilient and usually grow back much more after a harsh winter (sort of like natural pruning).

Even my forty -foot oak tree, the city planted, still has dieback some years. The trick is how you grow them. They grow quite well in a sheltered location in good soil. Japanese maples may need more winter protection if you live in Dunrobin, on two windswept acres. But most city yards with some protection should be perfectly fine. Here in Westboro and other downtown areas, that are within the city heat island, (you know the new buzz word for temperature differences between city cores and suburbia) Japanese maples will grow even better. You could probably add half a zone (zone 5B) between Westboro and Kanata. Ahh!! Gotta love that global warming, maybe one day, palm trees on the Western Parkway.

As delicate as some lace leaf Japanese maples look, all except a couple of varieties, do require good sun exposure. They are still maple trees and require it for good growth and color. These maples are not really shade plants; color will fade in heavy shade. Especially fall color and you know what our native maples look like in the fall, amazing.

By the way, most Japanese maples (and magnolias, rhodos and others) are grown on the west coast. This is not because they aren't very hardy, but rather for the longer growing season and therefore more annual growth. If not, we would all be paying even higher prices for smaller trees. Out west they can achieve a foot or more of annual growth, where as here, you might expect several inches a year. Growing in a milder climate does not impair hardiness, as some might believe. Hardiness is built in, but will be affected by factors other than cold. Poorly drained soil, the wrong PH, or drought can be more stressful than cold.

Japanese maples require good soil that won't dry out too quickly, but drains well, a good mulch all year, and maybe some extra water during drought times. They prefer a slightly acid soil, but it doesn't seem essential. The addition of peat and sand will help clay soils, at planting time, and I top dress with sulphur and manure annually. I swear plants and flowers, in the naturally acid soil at our cottage in the Maritimes, have better, brighter colors than the same ones here. Or maybe colors are just brighter when you are relaxed and on vacation.

I don't think I can stress too much, the importance of mulch on any plants. It saves the plant from being stressed with fluctuations in soil temperatures and moisture, and keeps breaking down to add to the soil composition.

There are many varieties that will grow well in the Ottawa area. Keep in mind a few growing habits of Japanese maples.

All lace leaf or dissectum types are weeping, except for one variety, (Seiryu). Therefore the height you buy is what you get. They usually grow wider than tall (that's the look that is all the rage in those garden mags). The branches will mound over each other for a beautiful effect. The only way to get more height is to train a leading branch up a stake for a few seasons till you get what you want.

The regular leaf or palmatum (like a mini maple leaf) are all upright and will eventually grow into large shrubs or small trees.

Both types are available in green and many shades of burgundy, red & purple. But it is the greens that give the orange and yellows of fall. The reds tend to get even brighter red in fall.

Some of the varieties I have grown successfully for many years in my west Ottawa yard with little or no winterkill are the following.

- Acer palmatum 'Bloodgood' - an old variety, reputedly the hardiest but many others seem just as hardy. Opens burgundy and holds color well all year. To approx. 15 feet.
- Acer palm. 'Trompenburg' - quick growing type, dark maroon with serrated & curled leaves unusual, but very nice, hardy
- Acer palm. 'Moonglow' - like Bloodgood but smaller leaves.
- Acer palm. Emperor 1 - a new and improved Bloodgood, may take over in the trade, with better color and faster growing.
- Acer palm. 'Red Pygmy' - outstanding, leaves are thin like bamboo, starts off burgundy in spring then to reddish green in summer then orange in fall. Grows to about 8-10 feet, vase shaped.
- Acer palm. 'Oshio Beni' - more of a copper burgundy color. Hardy and slower growing.
- Acer palm. 'Glowing Embers' - more red purple, than Bloodgood.
- Acer palm. 'Koto-No-Ito' - a beauty, leaves are so thin they are like threads, green then gold in the fall, very hardy.
- Acer palm. dissectum 'Inaba Shidare' - a very nice older cultivar, burgundy, good color that does not fade. (Some of the red maples will fade to greenish red in summer heat) It has a bright red fall color. Very hardy.
- Acer palm. diss. 'Garnet' - great color, more red (garnet) slow growing with purple stems, seems very hardy.
- Acer palm. diss. 'Waterfall' - a green lace leaf that turns a bright orange in fall.

- Acer palm. diss. ‘Red dragon’ – amazing deep purple color all year with strongly weeping branches. Some winter kill, but readily springs back each year
- Acer palm. diss. ‘Crimson Queen’ - old cultivar, reliable red, fades to green red in extreme heat, then turns a great red -orange in fall
- Acer shirasawanum aureum ‘Full moon’ - accept no substitutes, this one is rare, great and very hardy. It is the only gold fan-leaf maple. Leaves are barely indented, as to form small fans of gold. It needs a bit of shade so as not to burn in afternoon sun. Quite slow growing, rare, and therefore not cheap. The fall color turns to orange and reds.
- Acer circinatum – this is the native western vine maple. It looks like the above variety, fan shaped but green, and much cheaper and faster growing. It is good and hardy.
- 

There are probably many more Asian maples that are hardy here as well, we just have to try them and find out.

So don't believe people when they say Japanese maples are not hardy here. Plant them well, and protect them for the first few winters. Then stand back and admire them. You won't regret the effort.