

Japanese Maples - In Oklahoma

In Japan, the cultural appreciation and enthusiasm for maple trees has been expressed in music, paintings and writings for centuries. Today, hundreds of Japanese maple cultivars are enjoyed by people of all ages and grace gardens not only in Japan, but worldwide.

In Oklahoma, Japanese maples are available in nurseries and offer unlimited choices for the creative gardener. Graceful, stately and dramatic, cultivars of *Acer palmatum* and *A. japonicum* are the most commonly found, although other native and non-native Japanese *Acer* species are often classified together and referenced as “Japanese maples”.



Site Selection, Care and Pruning

Great site selection and good soil are always key to successful planting. Light requirements vary by cultivar from partial to full sun, but most will perform best when protected from the blistering Oklahoma afternoon sun. Well drained, slightly acidic, sandy loam mixed moderately with organic matter is ideal, but Japanese maples can adapt (although growth will be

compromised) given consistent watering and proper aeration. Avoiding extremes of wet and dry, and mulching their shallow roots helps moisture retention and prevents leaf scorch and damaging defoliation.

Japanese maples generally have no more nutrient requirements than the average garden plant. If planted in poor soil, only a once-yearly application of a balanced fertilizer can be applied, but only in early spring. Any later, and the tender shoots will not have enough time to harden off before winter.

Shaping can start immediately when the tree is two or three years established. Light corrective pruning can be performed anytime during the year, while major pruning should be avoided in early to mid-spring while leaves are emerging. Use of sharp tools and standard appropriate pruning methods apply to avoid injury and disease or insect vulnerability.

Problems and Disease

As a whole, Japanese maples are not prone to pathological problems or overly susceptible to insect attack; no more than other woody ornamentals. Proper site selection and wind protection can prevent leaf burn, wind and frost damage. Good cultural practices - soil nutrition, proper watering techniques, aeration and sanitation - encourage healthy growth, which in turn will head off insects and disease.



Surprisingly, overly fertile soil is not necessarily good either. Although great for vigorous growth, unique leaf variegation and shape may “revert” to normal shape and green color, losing the original character of the cultivar. When selecting red or variegated varieties, note that sun exposure can alter the original leaf appearance. Variegated and red varieties need afternoon shade, but deep shade may cause greening. Green-leaved varieties can usually tolerate more sun, but may still sunburn under strong afternoon exposure in Oklahoma. Red-leaved varieties may bronze or scorch in excessive sun.

Types and Characteristics

Most Japanese maple cultivars are distinguished and grouped mainly by the appearance and division of the leaf lobes and the overall size of the tree.

The characteristics are so varied and subtle, that in the interest of brevity, they are listed here for quick reference.

Size: Variations range from dwarf, to understory, to overstory - mature heights from 3 feet to over 30 feet accommodate small to large gardens.

Leaf Structure: Laceleaf varieties with deeply divided lobes are common, however structures include shallowly divided lobes, straplike and straight, rounded and palm-shaped. Lobe counts vary from five to about thirteen.

Leaf Texture: Many variations include: shiny, curling, toothed, jagged, smooth, irregular

Seasonal color display: Buds, new growth variegation, twig and bark color, and fall foliage color variations

Limb Structure: Twisting to straight, bark texture smooth to rough

Habits and Forms: Weeping, arching, cascading, low-growing, mounding, upright, spreading, irregular

Uses: Ornamental, specimen and companion plants to larger shrubs and trees, and smaller perennials. Rock gardens, mixed borders, container and feature or accent plantings.

Some Notable Cultivars

Knowing which type of Japanese maple you would like will go far in understanding the care requirements for what will quickly become one of your favorite plants. The varieties listed here are certainly not exhaustive, but can inspire you to find your own favorite. (Note: If planting in a container in Oklahoma zone 7a, select plants hardy to zone 5 (two zones colder) if overwintering outside. Fortunately, most varieties are hardy zones 5-8.)

Acer palmatum 'Beni kawa'

- Red winter stems
- Green leaves with red tinged edges
- Pink-to-red leaf stalks
- Golden-yellow fall foliage

Acer palmatum 'Bloodgood'

- Purple-red summer foliage with deep green undersides
- Bright red prominent fruits
- Upright habit to 30 feet high
- Popular cultivar, commonly offered
- Hardy to zone 6, so best not in containers in Oklahoma

Acer palmatum 'Viridis'

- Green, delicate laceleaf variety
- Golden fall color
- Cascading, dome-shaped habit
- Good for patio or pondside specimen

Acer palmatum 'Sharp's Pygmy'

- Interesting five-lobed structure, center lobe longer than others
- Orange to scarlet fall color
- Dense foliage
- Compact habit, requires little or no shaping

Color, texture, foliar interest, growth habit, adaptability - all reasons to invite one of these Japanese cultural icons into your Oklahoma garden.

Resources:

Vertrees, J.D. 2009. *Japanese Maples: The Complete Guide to Selection and Cultivation*. Portland, Oregon: Timber Press.

[University of Connecticut: College of Agricultural, Health and Natural Resources Plant Database](#)