Japanese Maples Add Flair to the Garden

Japanese Maple can be a wonderful small landscape tree.

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If you want to add a stunning element to your landscape, try planting one or more Japanese maples (*Acer palmatum*). There are incredible diverse and beautiful varieties available from our local nurseries.

These small trees have year round interest, but are particularly outstanding in the spring when new growth is anywhere from yellow-orange to maroon-red, and in the fall with showy leaves of scarlet, bright orange, or golden yellow. In the summer months, leaves may be soft to dark green; and in the winter, when these deciduous trees are bare, the green or red new stem growth of the previous season is a standout feature. When shopping for Japanese maples, remember that the “green” varieties have the lighter yellow-green leaves in the summer, and golden yellow to orange leaves in the fall. The “red” varieties have scarlet colored new leaf growth, which, as the trees age, stay maroon-red into late summer before turning green, and return to the maroon-red color in the fall. Reds are most often more expensive than green varieties.

Japanese maples, native to the Orient, are slow growing, no matter what the variety. Their mature growth can be anywhere from 8 feet for the weeping, low growing dwarf varieties, to 30 feet for some of the larger varieties. The width varies as much, depending on the cultivars. These trees, which take pruning well, can be single or multi-trunked; have medium to finely textured leaves; a low, dense rounded top; and spreading branches that assume a layered look. Although Japanese maples are the most delicate and airy looking of all maples, they are hardy and durable trees.

Most people showcase Japanese maples as a specimen plant or a focal point. One of the first homeowner gardens featured in the annual Maclay Garden tours effectively utilized a lacy-leafed Japanese maple variety planted on a raised berm, which provided good drainage, and was under-planted with thin bladed Mondo grass (*Ophiopogon japonicus*). Using a Japanese maple as a container plant is best accomplished with the dwarf varieties or with the smaller upright forms, provided there is good drainage. Some Japanese maples are also bonsai candidates.
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In our region (Hardiness Zone 8), Japanese maples (Hardiness Zones 4 – 8) benefit from full morning sun and partial shade during our scorching summer afternoons. They require a well-drained location and regular watering. Since these trees are shallow-rooted, watering is the single most important element in assuring a healthy Japanese maple. Leaf scorch may occur with excess sun, drought or wind. A good mulch of three or so inches over the soil will help to keep the soil temperature moderated and conserve moisture. Be sure to pull the mulch away from the tree trunk slightly to prevent crown rot and insect damage.

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