



Japanese Maples

Woodland Wonder

By David Dunn
Rideau Woodland Ramble

Japanese Maples are one of the jewels of our woodland gardens. There are 2 dozen maples at the Ramble, and they provide that magical surprise along the woodland trails that only the Japanese Maple can do!

Many will say that they are leery of planting these delightful small trees in an Ottawa garden, but we have spent the last 25 years experimenting and testing, and have had great success. This story will give you some insight into our experience over this time, and hopefully entice some of you to try the Japanese Maple in your gardens.

We will take a look at the conditions they require, location, and winter protection. We'll also look at their role in the landscape, and finally suggest some of the specimens that we have had greatest success with here at the Ramble.

Please read on, and capture the wonder of the Japanese Maple!



“Red Select” is a wonderful example of a “cutleaf” Japanese Maple. In the image shown here, it is in combination with a woodland fern that also has that “cutleaf” form, but is a highly contrasting chartreuse colour. This sharp difference provides a startling surprise in this combination of plants I call a tangled dream. Not many plants can provide the refined impact and drama of a Japanese Maple.



Red Select

The other interesting contrast in this case is with the Hosta. Hosta Albo Marginata provides a leafy green and white and green carpet, from which the maple emerges, thus further reinforcing the refinement of the delicate leaves and the quality of the colour.

Conditions for Success

Japanese Maples are at the northern most limit of their range in the Ottawa area. In southern climates, they are seen as a small tree, whereas in our area, they are more aptly seen as a shrub. (Although some have been known to grown quite high in the area). They need a good rich woodland soil, which is acidic as well as constant moisture, although they do not want wet feet. One of the biggest challenges to correct placement of a Japanese Maple is with respect to the winter conditions it will be exposed to. They are most susceptible to winter wind and sun, and the damage they can exhibit is in response to the drying effect of these conditions. They are more capable of withstanding cold than they are wind and sun.

The way to solve this challenge is 3 fold -

1. Placement where they will receive only dappled light, and be sheltered from winter wind is the first step. These conditions are similar to those you would seek for a Rhododendron.
2. You would ensure that this location is one that will not totally dry out at any point in the summer.
3. While not absolutely essential, you will have greater success with the insurance of a winter blanket used each winter. We use the white "felt-like" blankets. We wrap our, maples after the ground is frozen and we are sure we are not creating a tasty little refuge for mice. These blankets reflect the light, do not allow the plant to heat up during spring thaw, and being white vanish in the winter snowscape! Furthermore, because it is not a weave such as burlap, there is no ability for the wind to get through and dry out the maples tender twigs.

These locations are best described as "woodland", "understory", or sites beside structures in the lee of the wind and in some shade. If the maple is located with this type of winter protection, it can tolerate some more sun in the summer months, as long as it is in a moist location.



Fox in the Garden

Role in the Garden

Japanese Maples can be placed as specimens at important destinations in the garden, or as key features against a backdrop. They are best used in locations where they are featured. In the image above, our spaniel Fox is rambling the trail just before a maple positioned to be the image you see as you come perpendicular to the trail through the Iron Arbour. It's a focal point to draw your eye. Even though this is a sunny border later in the season, for much of the year and in the winter it is a protected spot for the maple. There is a wonderful maple known as "Waterfall". It is a weeping green cutleaf Japanese Maple that is very elegant and a powerful anchor for the turn on one of the trails. In this case it announces direction.



Waterfall

Colour

Japanese Maples are available in several colours. "Trompenburg", "Red Select" and "Bloodgood", as well as Inaba Shidare bring wonderful red and wine colours into the garden as well as spectacular fall colours. The Japanese "Full Moon" Maple is palm leaved, and is a phenomenal chartreuse with red stems in the spring. Later in the season it is a wonderful golden colour. "Waterfall" is a rich green, and "Floating Cloud" has a wonderful tri-coloured leaf. "Lion's Head" or "Shishigashira" has heavily textured crinkled leaves, and is a show stopper!

Form

You can see cutleaf, palm leaf, crinkled leaf, variegated leaf and finger leaf (such as in "Red Pygmy"), and you can find, upright, weeping and spreading forms....quite the palate for your garden.



"Full Moon" brightens the woodland

At Rideau Woodland Ramble we have experimenting with a wide range of Japanese Maples for years, and some of our collection has been in the garden for a quarter of a century, proving their resilience. As a result we have come to realize that many maples have proved to be more forgiving than others, even though they may be labeled the same zone. This experience has allowed us to settle on the list of Japanese Maples most suited to our zone.

These are also the only ones available in our nursery. Some of these are –

- Acer palmatum 'Blood Good'
- Acer palmatum dissectum 'Ever Red'
- Acer palmatum 'Emperor I'
- Acer shirasawanum 'Aureum'
- Acer shirasawanum 'Autumn Moon'

Overall Impact



Trompenburg in a sea of Hosta "Francee"



Late Season Colour

At the end of the day, colour in a woodland or shady garden is very difficult. The Japanese Maple is second to none at bringing quality and colour into the garden all through the season....and just when you think its about to wane, you are enriched with brilliant fall colour!

Japanese Maples are definitely a wonder in the woodland.

Graceful, Elegant, Startling..... Well worth some tender loving care, ...care that will be rewarded for years.

Dave Dunn
Rideau Woodland Ramble

Rideau Woodland Ramble (613-258-3797) is open from April to November 7 days a week from 9am-5pm, and carries a range of Japanese Maples for sale that can be seen in their display gardens .www.rideauwoodlandramble.com

All Photos by Dave Dunn 2007