Japanese Maples: Nine Personal Favorites

Japanese Maple, *Acer dissectum* ‘Red Dragon’

My love affair with Japanese maples began in 1991 when my wife, Lib Jones, and I were given an *Acer dissectum* ‘Red Dragon’ as a house warming gift. Lib, who likes to name most of our fauna and flora, named the tree “Ming.”

Ming has not only thrived, but has survived a couple of major traumas over the years. About ten years ago a large limb fell from a pine tree during an ice storm and severed the left side of the tree. At the time, I was still very much a novice with both Japanese maples and pruning, but tried to clean up the damage. Not wanting to give up on the tree, I performed some minor cosmetic surgery that February to try to encourage growth that would disguise some of the disfigurement. The efforts were successful and to my surprise Ming started taking on an even more interesting shape. Unfortunately, several years later, we experienced *déjà vu*—another ice storm, another crashing limb and another injury to our special tree. At least this time we had good sense to have the offending pine tree removed.

While our specimen is approximately 16 years old and about 3½ feet tall and 5 feet wide, J. D. Vertrees, the author of what many consider the seminal volume on the subject, *Japanese Maples*, says that it will eventually become a cascading seven-foot tree. As indicated in its botanical name, the leaves are deeply incised and come on in the spring with a bright scarlet hue. During summer, they become dark burgundy, eventually returning to brilliant red in the late fall.

Vertrees recommends that ‘Red Dragon’ be protected from cold wind and summer drought, but emphasizes this cultivar makes an excellent small garden, rock garden or container plant. Lib and I would surely second that assessment. TN

Japanese Maple, *Acer dissectum* ‘Seiryu’

About the year 2000, my wife Lib and I added a very interesting and readily available Japanese Maple, *Acer dissectum* ‘Seiryu’ to our garden landscape. The name means “blue-green dragon.” I’m sure many of you who make weekly pilgrimages to your favorite nurseries and garden centers have seen this variety for sale. Its uniqueness lies in its growth habit. It is one of the few (some say only) in the species *dissectum* that is upright in its growth habit.

Ours is about seven feet tall and wide. The horizontal growth has not been weeping as one would normally expect from a lace leaf specimen.

Mountain Maples, one of the best-known maple growers on the West Coast describes ‘Seiryu’:

- Container: 6-10 feet
- Landscape: Height: 11-15 feet; Width: 10-12 feet
Suitable for bonsai

- Color: Spring and Summer: green; Fall: yellow, gold, sometimes orange-red
- Full sun to partial shade

Our tree is planted within six feet of the house and gets partial sun with western exposure. The amount of actual direct light is quite limited—large crepe myrtles filter much of the sunlight. This year, for the first time, our tree turned a beautiful red. The tree is not “twiggy,” but is shaped easily with regular pruning.

As J. D. Vertrees was fond of saying, “limited, but constant pruning is best.” I try to prune my Japanese maples at least once per season, leaving my heavy pruning to winter when the tree is dormant.

For those who are novices when it comes to Japanese maples, ‘Seiryu’ would add interest and variety to your landscape. TN

Japanese Maple, *Acer palmatum* ‘Tamuke yama’

Holding up well in our heat and humidity, *Acer palmatum* ‘Tamuke yama’ is a Japanese maple for the South. One of the more common red-leaf trees from the species *dissectum*, this strong weeper turns a deep purple red most summers, followed by crimson in the fall.

Lib and I received our first specimen (we have two) as a gift for Lib’s 50th birthday (oops!) several years ago. She actually picked it out, and my brother took his truck to the grower and brought it back to Charlotte. Ours has been a vigorous grower, adding approximately eight to twelve inches of lateral growth each year. I have pruned it regularly to keep it in bounds of its rather confining location close to our sunroom.

This very old cultivar—listed as early as 1710—will eventually get eight to ten feet tall and equally as wide. The *pennatiful* cuts—leaves that have a central axis with parts branching off it—are not as deep as those in some other common varieties such as ‘Crimson Queen’ and ‘Dissectum Nigrum’.

The bark of the twigs and young branches is a deep maroon red, overcast with a whitish tone.

If you’re new to Japanese maples, this is a very good red, weeping specimen that should do well in your garden with minimal attention. Unlike some maples, this one can take almost full sun and still do well with a fair amount of shade.
I saw ‘Tamuke yama’ this planting season at both of our major home improvement stores in Charlotte, NC. They had nice specimens at reasonable prices. 

Japanese Maple, Acer matsumurae ‘Fascination’

Sometimes, as plant lovers, we get lucky. It was late 2004 and Garden Secrets in Charlotte, NC, had already announced that 2005 would be their last year in business on Park South Road. I had dropped by just to see what they might have gotten in recently, and found them unloading a truck of Japanese maples. None of the trees were the common varieties. They weren't yet priced and their limbs were still tied in a fashion similar to stacks of Christmas trees on holiday lots. I made the manager promise me not to sell any of them before I got to take a closer look. I had to wait almost two weeks before they could decide what the sales prices were going to be. Lib and I proceeded to buy seven different trees.

The largest of the specimens was Acer matsumurae ‘Fascination’. Apparently, this is one of the newer cultivars, as J. D. Vertrees, the author of Japanese Maples, includes this fine tree in a section of his book titled “Cultivars Not Yet Assessed.” As I tried to learn more about this tree before I made a commitment to purchase it, I found information to be a bit sketchy.

‘Fascination’ is described as an upright and rounded maple, similar to Acer japonicum ‘Acontifolium’. The leaves are green, seven-lobed and edged with large narrow teeth. They begin in the spring as gold to yellow-orange, changing to light green in summer, and then to a glowing orange in the fall. This picture taken by Erv Evans, now retired from North Carolina State University, shows the beautiful leaves of ‘Fascination’ (used with permission).

The bark is interesting in that it is green with some white striations. NC State indicates that mature trees should reach about 16 feet in height.

While one of the newer trees in my collection, ‘Fascination’ is one of the trees that gets the most comments from visitors. Its size, shape and color command attention. ‘Fascination’ is not easily found, but worth a look if you like broad, upright, green maples. 

Japanese Maple, Acer palmatum ‘Waterfall’

A strongly weeping lace leaf tree, Acer palmatum ‘Waterfall’ is wonderful over a bank or rock wall. A seedling from the 1920s, its name comes from its flowing appearance and cascading tendency.

The branch development of ‘Waterfall’ is strong and sturdy. Branches at the top slowly add height to the tree as it matures. However, young plants should be staked or grafted quite high to attain height. The side branches are very horizontal and tumble strongly.

In a container, ‘Waterfall’ is likely to attain a height of approximately 5 feet. However, in the landscape the tree can attain a height of 6-10 feet. It may eventually get 10-12 feet wide.

Good medium green foliage throughout the growing season turns bright gold with touches of crimson in the fall.
Japanese Maple, *Acer palmatum* ‘Shindeshojo’

It only seems appropriate that as I sit down to write about *Acer palmatum* ‘Shindeshojo’, that I have just enjoyed one of the tree’s most glorious shows.

‘Shindeshojo’, a bushy, upright specimen in our garden, has completed two of its four phases of garden pleasure. In early spring, it leafs out as a “ball of fire.” The red is so bright it calls attention to itself as soon as one walks into the garden. After a couple of weeks of brilliance, it migrates toward its summer reddish-green. Phase three comes in the fall when it once again turns red and orange. Properly pruned, this fine tree gives the gardener a beautiful structural outline for the winter—a true four season performer.

Your ‘Shindeshojo’ is likely to get about 10 feet tall and about 6 feet wide in 10 years. It is not one of the taller maples, but instead, broadens and becomes fuller. To keep it from looking too dense, I prune the interior branches out several times a year. As I have mentioned in earlier articles,

According to J. D. Vertrees in his book *Japanese Maples*, ‘Waterfall’ handles full sun better than many others in the *dissectum* species.

My specimen is thriving in a highly protected position, situated under a Dogwood, *Cornus florida* ‘Cherokee Princess’. It doesn’t seem to mind. TN
prune your Japanese maples often, but not heavily. Doing this, you encourage growth that pleases your eye and eliminates energy going to areas of the plant that you were going to prune anyway.

This cultivar is tolerant of most garden conditions and can be grown in almost full sun or with a considerable amount of shade. However, if you want to get the most from its color variation, make sure that it gets at least a half day of sun. TN

Japanese Maple, *Acer palmatum* ‘Beni shichihenge’

**Variation** is one of the characteristics that many maple fanciers pursue. *Acer palmatum* ‘Beni shichihenge’ meets that standard and more.

With a name that means “red and cheerful,” this specimen is similar to the more well-known cultivar ‘Butterfly’. However, the markings are pinkish-orange rather than pink. The basic coloration is green or bluish green with white margins.

I have found my variegated maples do better with some protection from direct sun, especially afternoon sun. My tree is under a canopy of high shade (30-40 feet) and seems to be very happy. I have been told by growers the variegated maples will do okay in full sun, but my experience is that the leaves tend to burn and curl.

‘Beni schichihenge’ is a slow-growing specimen that tends to be twiggy. You will have a nicer tree if you prune it regularly, opening up the center. Otherwise, it might end up looking more like a bush. It might eventually reach 10-12 feet tall and 6 feet wide, but will take many years to get there.

If you want to add a Japanese maple that most of your garden visitors have never seen, this might be the one. I have seen it locally at garden centers, so you won’t have to charter a plane to Oregon to buy one. TN
Japanese Maple, *Acer palmatum* ‘Okushimo’

Mountain Maples, one of the largest growers in the country, offers this description of *Acer palmatum* ‘Okushimo’: “The beauty of this tree cannot be described.” I’m not sure I’m prepared to go *thaat* far, but ‘Okushimo’ is a beauty and a unique addition in the garden that already has a few Japanese maples in its landscape. ‘Okushimo’ is a very old cultivar, recorded as early as the 1700s.

“The beauty of this tree cannot be described.”

The tree has an upright, vase-shaped habit and leaves grow in tiny bunches on fine twigs. For this reason, ‘Okushimo’ is a bonsai favorite.

As a landscape tree, it will eventually get 15-20 feet tall. However, with proper pruning, one can control the size to fit the location. You can also manage this very interesting tree by planting it in a container, limiting the size by about half. In a container, the tree would be a fascinating feature for a patio garden.

When pruning I find it best to remove all crossing branches and all those buds that will eventually create branches I don’t want. My personal preference on this tree is to have much of the interior open, so that I can enjoy the silhouette during the winter—I don’t want this tree to look like a Japanese maple bush!

The “claim to fame” of this specimen is its tiny leaves that curl up at the margins.

Beautiful gold fall color is a bonus. The dominate color during growing season is a medium green with some black tint to the leaves. After all, ‘Okushimo’ is translated as “the pepper and salt leaf.”

TN

Japanese Maple, *Acer palmatum* ‘Shaina’

Every time I see this beautiful little tree, I marvel at its ancestry. It is said to be a witch’s broom mutation on the ever-popular and very common ‘Bloodgood’. However, while this might be the parentage, this tufted-leaf offspring looks nothing like its progenitor. *Acer palmatum* ‘Shaina’ has small leaves that give it a bushy effect.

New growth is bright red and the mature summer leaves are more maroon, with some turning to green. The fall brings the garden a ball of brilliant red.

‘Shaina’ is a much slower grower than ‘Bloodgood’ and will grow to 3-4 feet in ten years, topping out at 8-10 feet in old age. You can easily keep it smaller with judicious pruning. Because it has dense foliage close to each branch, one can shape it into a rather interesting form that may complement companion plants. For this same reason, many choose ‘Shaina’ as a bonsai specimen or grow it in a container on the patio. As for companions, be sure and choose plants that are also slow growing or you will find this fine tree overwhelmed by its neighbors.
While not overly common in the trade, ‘Shaina’ is available if you keep your eyes open. In this last article of my series on Japanese maples, I want to mention that many local nurseries stock the common cultivars. Southern Styles Nursery at 4237 Rea Road in Charlotte, NC (28226), has one of the widest selections of Japanese maples in our area, and is a good place to “window shop.”

As most of you already know, our large home improvement stores now carry varieties that just a couple of years ago we would have considered “a find.” My wife Lib and I have been known to make the rounds of these stores on the south side of Charlotte on Thursday nights to see what the trucks have brought in for the weekend. Yes, we’re obsessed!  

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Pictured above: An unknown variety of Japanese Maple, *Acer palmatum*, is trained as a bonsai specimen.

Non-copyrighted pictures were gleaned from the Internet to illustrate this article.

Tom Nunnenkamp is an Extension Master Gardener with Mecklenburg County, NC. He and his wife Lib Jones are caretakers of a beautiful garden called Maple Walk. As the name suggests, the garden is planted with numerous specimen Japanese maples. The garden is partially shaded by mature trees limbed up into a high canopy. Tom’s article series, which featured some of his favorite Japanese maples, first appeared in *The Thymes: Master Gardener News*, Issues 1-9, 2006.