

# Japanese Maples

## *Brilliance and Delicacy*



**K-STATE**  
Research and Extension

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Japanese maples, whose botanical name is *Acer palmatum*, are small trees that are usually grown for their colorful and beautiful leaves, their elegance, and their shape.

With a staggering choice of over 700 varieties, the combinations of color, height, width, leaf texture, and shape are almost limitless. Many grow into upright trees reaching 15 to 25 feet tall, while others take on a cascading or weeping shrub appearance and remain low and spreading.

As you might guess, Japanese maples are native to Japan. The Japanese have bred, selected, and propagated them for centuries. They made their way to England and the United States in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

One of the best things about Japanese maples is they take on a new persona with each season, so choose a location where you can easily see them!

- “In spring, the new leaves appear with vibrant colors of red, yellow, pink, or rich green. Variegated cultivars are a party of colors. As summer arrives, leaf color intensifies with deeper greens or purples.” (J. D. Vertrees and Peter Gregory, *Japanese Maples*)
- Their show of fall leaf color is absolutely spectacular. The brilliant fire-reds, crimsons and tangerine-reds are intense.
- Once the fall leaves are off, their shapely and twisting branches carry their beauty through the winter with graceful silhouettes. One particular eye-catcher is Sango Kaku. Its branches turn red in the winter, adding a much needed splash of color.

Most Japanese maples are hardy to planting zones 5 to 8. Here in the Kansas City area, we are in zone 6b, so we are good-to-go for using this wonderful and versatile plant.

## Finding a Spot, Shopping and Planting

### STEP 1 Locate places in your yard where Japanese maples will thrive.

Planting a Japanese maple in a spot it likes is half the battle! Because their leaves are thin and delicate, most need a location where they get the following:

- Morning sun and partial shade or dappled light (partial shade from a nearby tree) in the afternoon. The hot, afternoon sun is too harsh for most Japanese maples and can fry their leaves.
- Protection from harsh and drying winds, which results in browning and tattering of the leaves.

Locations that usually meet these requirements are the north or east side of your house, or under a mature, large tree.

Japanese maples like slightly acidic soil, and good drainage is an essential. Not too wet, not too dry. They don't like “wet feet,” but don't allow the soil to dry out either.

As you scout your yard, notice how much space, both vertically and horizontally, is available for a new plant.

## STEP 2 Time to Shop!

Now that you know potential spots for a Japanese maple (or two or three!), it's time to go shopping. Japanese maples are rather slow growing (about 1 foot per year), which makes them pricey, so take your time when selecting one. There will be many sizes and shapes to choose from, especially in bigger garden centers.

Only consider plants with leaves that look very healthy and are thriving. *Avoid any plant with dry or unhealthy leaves.* It means the plant is stressed.

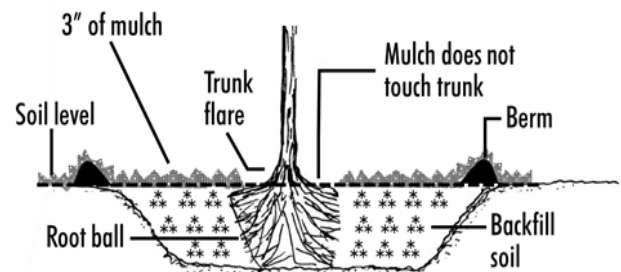
Read the plant tag carefully. What does it look like full grown? How tall and wide does it get? What color are the leaves in the spring? The summer? The fall? Is it a look you are awed by? What are its care requirements?

Pick a plant that suits your fancy and fits in the space available *when mature*.

While at the store, pick up some mulch if you don't have some at home.

## STEP 3 Planting

- a. Find the trunk flare. It is the area at the base of the trunk that swells out (flares) to join up with the underground root system. You might need to remove some of the soil around the trunk to find it.
- b. Dig a hole the same height as the root ball and twice as wide.
- c. Squeeze the sides of the container to loosen the root ball, and carefully remove the plant so the roots stay intact.
- d. Sometimes container plants become root bound, which means the roots are matted or tangled or growing in circles. Check your plant. If it is root bound, "unchoke" it by taking a sharp knife and cutting an X across the bottom of the root ball and four vertical slices along the sides of the plant.
- e. Place the plant in the center of the hole on solid, undisturbed soil. *Make sure the trunk flare is 1 inch above the final soil surface.* Don't plant it too deep!



- Use some soil to secure the plant in a straight position. Then use the original soil to backfill the hole a few inches at a time. After each addition, gently firm the soil and gently water to naturally settle the soil and remove air pockets. Keep backfilling until the soil is just below the trunk flare.
- f. With the excess soil, build a low berm around the plant just outside the planting hole. This creates a basin to retain moisture until it soaks into the root ball and adjacent backfill soil. Water thoroughly again to settle the soil.
  - g. Spread 3 inches of organic mulch, such as wood chips or shredded bark, in a wide circle around the plant. Mulch suppresses weeds, conserves moisture, and helps protect the shallow roots of Japanese maples. *Keep the mulch at least 4 inches away from the trunk.* When mulch touches the trunk, it causes the bark to rot and prevents it from getting the air it needs.

# Ensuring You and Your Japanese Maple Have a Happy Partnership

## Water

Proper watering throughout the first year is often the difference between success and failure.

## Day After Planting

Thoroughly water again to settle the soil and eliminate air pockets.

## Spring-Summer-Fall of the First Year

As a general rule, newly planted Japanese maples need at least 10 gallons of water per week. It needs to be released slowly so the water soaks deeply into the soil and wets the entire root system.

The easiest way to accomplish this is to drill a small hole in a 5-gallon bucket, fill it with water, and place it over the root ball and soil just outside the root ball. Let the water drip out. Move the bucket to a different location and repeat.

**IMPORTANT:** Before watering, push your fingers a couple of inches into the backfill area around the root ball. If dry, water. If moist, wait. Remember: Good drainage means—not too wet, not too dry.

## First Winter

Once the leaves fall, water monthly if the ground isn't frozen.

For watering guidelines after the first year, go to the Internet and search for K-State publication *Watering Newly Planted and Young Trees and Shrubs*.

## Fertilizer

Don't fertilize Japanese maples the first growing season. After the first growing season, fertilize each spring before the leaves emerge.

## Mulch

Renew the mulch in the spring. Stick to the 3-inch guideline, and continue to keep mulch away from the trunk.

## Soil Above the Roots

Japanese maples have a shallow root system, so protect the roots by leaving the soil around them undisturbed and weed free. Resist the urge to work the soil or plant other plants, like hostas, in the soil above the roots.

## Staking

If a Japanese maple tree comes with a stake, leave the stake in. Don't automatically stake a new tree unless it's apparent it needs support or protection.

## Pruning

With hundreds of varieties to choose from, pick one that will be the appropriate size for your location. Occasional pruning maybe be needed to maintain its form.

Remove the dead or damaged branches. Proper pruning techniques allow you to shape as needed for beauty.

Heavy pruning can be done in February or early March when the plant is still dormant (hasn't started budding out yet). Light pruning to shape may be done anytime during the growing season.

## Disease and insects

Assuming all the previous care is happening, Japanese maples are relatively disease and insect free.

## Popular Varieties That Grow Well in Our Area

Here are a few varieties to get you going, but don't limit your search to these when there are many possibilities!

Common Name	Leaf Color			Form	Height/ Width (ft)
	Spring	Summer	Fall		
<b>LARGER</b>					
<b>Bloodgood</b> Holds its deep red color, very popular	Deep red	Deep red	Bright crimson	Upright	H: 12-20 W: 15-20
<b>Sango Kaku</b> Outstanding feature is its red bark, especially in winter!	Green edged with red	Green	Bright crimson	Upright	H: 20-25 W: 15-20
<b>SMALLER</b>					
<b>Crimson Queen</b> Holds its deep red color, very popular	Deep red	Deep red	Bright crimson	Weeping, mounded	H: 6-10 W: 10-12
<b>Red Dragon</b> Holds its deep red color, very popular	Cherry-pink	Dark red	Bright crimson	Weeping, mounded	H: 6-8 W: 12-15
<b>Viridis</b> Delicate, lacy leaves	Green	Green	Gold-yellow- red	Weeping, mounded	H: 8-10 W: 6-10
<b>Waterfall</b> Finely cut, long leaves	Green	Green	Gold-yellow- red	Weeping, mounded	H: 6-10 W: 6-12