

Unusual and Lesser Known Japanese Maples[©]

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I have been an avid Japanese maple fan since I can remember. As a young boy I grew up in Oregon, the mecca of Japanese maples outside of Japan. Some believe they actually grow better in Oregon than they do in Japan! Our mild climate favors their culture.

I find the topic of this presentation to be daunting and almost impossible to present properly, because a Japanese maple tree means so many different things to different people. The one thing I believe we can all agree on is that the dynamic diversity and unusual liveliness of these trees speaks to us in a language of their own. Some are soft spoken and shy like 'Fairy Hair', others bold and loud like 'Osakazuki' and others peaceful – a strange word to use for a plant I know, but I think we can agree it is a suitable fit, especially when standing before a naked 100-year-old dissectum gnarled yet truthful showing all its wounds, its faults, but mostly its grace.

The main reason I find this presentation so daunting is because within the last decade the number of Japanese maple cultivars has doubled to more than 600 registered taxa and many others yet to be classified. J.D. Vertree's 4th edition of his world renowned book, *Japanese Maples*, has been recently released with over 150 new cultivars added. I overheard Peter Gregory, who has been editing and does all the revisions on Vertrees' book on each edition since Vertree's passing, speaking with a woman who wanted him to identify a Japanese maple cultivar that she was showing him a picture of. His first question after a very long pause, "What does it look like in spring?" "It has a wonderful pink tinge to the margins and has red petioles." "Hmm." Replied Mr. Gregory. "What does it look like in the fall?" "I don't know, I haven't seen it in the fall yet. I'm not sure." "Well, when you see what this beautiful little tree does in the fall, let me know and I will see if I can identify it for you." This being said by the man that knows almost all Japanese maples inside and out; so, where do I begin?

I am going to take the road less traveled and introduce not only new or unusual Japanese maples, but offer a perspective on the different species of Japanese maples outside of the *Acer palmatum* world. When one thinks of Japanese maples they automatically think of *A. palmatum*, which the majority of what is propagated are, but there are several other species that the plant hunters and propagators of the world have been refining for decades. The fruits of their labor are now finally coming into fashion.

Before I get into the presentation itself I would like to take just a quick second and tell you why I am so in love with these trees. I am no longer a grower, but an avid collector. My collection is only as large as my yard, actually as large as my wife will allow it to be. So I sit on about 40 cultivars, but dream of the day I can add one here or squeeze one in there. It is so hard for me to walk into a nursery and from 100 ft away immediately see a tree that screams out – "come over here, before she notices, I want to play at your house, if we are quick about it she may not even notice." But, of course, she always does and this is where my expertise on new and unusual Japanese maples comes into play, for I must delicately talk my way into just one more.

INTO THE NEW: NOT JUST PALMATUMS ANYMORE

There are many species regarded as a "Japanese maple" that are not *A. palmatum* that have different ornate qualities such as leaf size, shape, and color as well as stature and unique bark.

***Acer japonicum* – a New Culture in Cultivation**

Acer japonicum has large orbicular foliage which consistently offers outstanding fall colors of yellow, orange, and red often in the same leaf. The straight species is a medium-sized tree up to 30 ft. There are several cultivars such as 'Green Cascade', a weeping dissected form and the most popular 'Aconitifolium'. I personally prefer the straight species, with its bold

yet graceful presence in any garden.

Acer crataegifolium

A very unusual and rare form of Japanese maple in cultivation. There are few variegated cultivars such as ‘Veitchii’, available in the USA. There are several more cultivars available in Japan.

Acer shirasawanum

It wasn’t until the mid 1980s that *A. shirasawanum* was named as a separate species from *A. japonicum* and *A. palmatum*. The foliage is orbicular, but much smaller than *A. japonicum*. The leaves are paper thin which allows light to enliven the foliage as the sun peaks through the trees. Does well in full sun.

Acer sieboldianum

Every tree has its place. *Acer sieboldianum* has few cultivars thus far, but I believe it is a species to explore in the future. There is a certain elegance to the foliage that other species lack. It also offers outstanding fall color reliably year after year (Fig. 1). Some believe that it can survive in Zone 4, but the information out there is conflicting, but isn’t that always the case.



Fig. 1. *Acer sieboldianum* fall color.

Acer buergerianum

This species is native to China but definitely belongs in the fold of Japanese maples. There are a few cultivars available but at this time are rare in the trade. They are difficult to propagate, being grafted onto *A. palmatum* or *A. buergerianum*. Here is a chance to be creative and find a solution! It does well in Zone 9. I used the straight species at my house in Southern California as street trees and they grew beautifully with reliable fall color.

Acer capillipes

In the snake bark family, this unusual tree grows up towards 30 ft which adds a needed layer of mid-story interest in any garden. The fall color is yellow or red or yellow turning red. The foliage is unique in size, form, and texture. The striations of white along the green stems add year round interest.

PATIENCE AND MORE PATIENCE: THE SELECTION PROCESS

Introductions as of Late

Our selection process is, briefly: collect seed from named taxa in an open garden setting. Cull out those seedlings that don’t look interesting or unusual – which is most. This can take up to

5 to 10 years. Begin propagating those with the most promise, to insure backups. Out of thousands of seedlings, perhaps one or more, or none, will be worth naming. That is more or less the route, with some exceptions.

We never intentionally hybridize cultivars, although we might place two interesting cultivars next to each other. ‘Japanese Princess’ was a seedling from ‘Mikawa Yatsubusa’, which grew next to ‘Red Emperor’, with our hope being to discover a red ‘Mikawa Yatsubusa’. So we’re getting closer to that.

***Acer palmatum* ‘Japanese Princess’**

Originating as a seedling from ‘Mikawa Yatsubusa’, this dwarf breaks pink-red in spring (Fig. 2) and later becomes creamy-white with a pink blush. It grows to be 2 ft by 2 ft in 10 year which is perfect for any small garden or container. It is an introduction by Flora Wonder™ of Buchholz and Buchholz Nursery.



Fig. 2. *Acer palmatum* ‘Japanese Princess’.

***Acer shirasawanum* ‘Kawaii’**

This unusual dissectum type breaks with orange, plum-red color in spring and holds throughout summer. This is a great attribute for many cultivars that break with bright spring colors then often fade to a pleasant variation of green or bronzes. The name ‘Kawaii’ means “cute” in Japanese. This beautiful dissectum (Fig. 3) grows to be 1 ft by 2 ft in 10 year. It is an introduction by Flora Wonder™ of Buchholz and Buchholz Nursery.



Fig. 3. *Acer shirasawanum* ‘Sensu’.

***Acer shirasawanum* ‘Sensu’**

The green serrated leaves of this cultivar create a muse-like dancing effect in a light breeze. Unlike any Japanese maple I have ever seen this bold tree transitions colors with bravado yet grace. The fall color is electric shades of orange. It grows to be 9 ft by 4 ft in 10 year – yet another new cultivar that can fit in a small garden or condo patio. It is an introduction by Flora Wonder™ of Buchholz and Buchholz Nursery.

***Acer buergerianum* ‘Mino Yatsubusa’**

This striking dwarf is native to China, but is well-deserved to be included into the Japanese maple grouping. The foliage is tri-lobed with elongated, glossy, dark-green foliage. The petioles are a burgundy-red and seem to be in a slow but constant state of growth. The foliage layers upon each other create texture in this evolutionary dwarf. It has rough bark and is more shrub-like than an open tree. It is rare in cultivation. This needs to change for it is such an outstanding tree that grows very well. It has been known to be difficult to graft onto both *A. palmatum* and *A. buergerianum*.

***Acer crataegifolium* ‘Vetichii’**

This species has unusual triangular-ovate leaves which make it stand apart from other Japanese maples. *Acer crataegifolium* ‘Vetichii’ is the most common cultivar produced in the USA yet still rare in cultivation. There are many more variegated cultivars in Japan so, hopefully, this tree will make a splash with new and unusual cultivars in the future. It has an open shrub form that does well in full sun and thrives in mixed beds. No reason not to include it in your garden! Take a look, they are out there. Mine grows very well and is a jewel of the garden.

***Acer palmatum* ‘Akegarasu’**

This cultivar dates back to the 1700s and is still in production to this day. ‘Akegarasu’ translates to “the crows at dawn”. As the leaves unfurl they look like the wings of a bird just before flight. It is an upright tree to 20-plus ft. The leaves are large reddish-purple. It is my personal favorite and I believe it to be the best of all red cultivars.

SUMMARY

In closing, there is still so much to explore and define in the world of *Acer*. Not only are there ornate species outside of *A. palmatum*, but what I take most out of this list of plants is their ability to find their way into the small garden or container patio. Species like *A. shirasawanum* ‘Kawaii’, only 1 ft by 2 ft in 10 year!; or the vertical enjoyment of *A. shirasawanum* ‘Sensu’ or *A. palmatum* ‘Tsukasa Silhouette’. The limit of space is now the norm in Europe and in the USA. Creating new plants that will fulfill this new style of miniature and vertical growing gardens has become necessary for gardeners to enjoy the limited space with which they have to work. The maple growers worldwide have understood this niche and have been working, some of them decades, to fulfill what they believe to be necessary now and in the future. One must always think forward. There are many more wonderful plants out there. Be careful, for once you buy your first *Acer*, the addiction of collecting this exciting genus of trees is inevitable, but in the happiest of ways.

Literature Cited

Vertrees, J. and Gregory, P. 2010. Japanese Maples: The Complete Guide to Selection and Cultivation 4th ed. Timber Press, Inc., Portland, Oregon.

Plant Resources

Mail Order: EssenceoftheTree.com (formerly Mountain Maples). They grow hundreds of cultivars with care and great quality.

Wholesale: Buchholz and Buchholz nursery in the U.S. Sell mainly liners, but also canned material of unusual plants from around the world.

Niche Market Nurseries: Shadow Nursery in Tennessee that specializes in Japanese maples

that will grow well in the Southern states.

Tsukasa Nursery, Tokyo, Japan. Tsukasa Nursery grows over 600 cultivars of Japanese maples. They are one of the leaders in the industry.

Dick van der Maat Nursery, Booskoop, The Netherlands. Dick van der Maat Nursery grows over 700 taxa of Japanese maples. They firmly believe in organic growing and the benefits of microbial organisms. They are a larger production nursery than Tsukasa Nursery, but their goals are the same, to create something special, something we just can't live without.

Questions and Answers

Doug Lee: Can you suggest ways to improve the growth and maintenance of maples in the southern California environment?

Mike Murphy: It's very important to keep the roots cool. Mulches, other plants and/or structures could be used to shade the soil to keep it cooler. Some taxa will go to Zone 9. Acidifying the soil and providing excellent drainage can also be helpful. Leaves on many taxa will still dry up and fall in August, but they will re-flush and carry through the fall although it will probably diminish fall color. However, you should still see excellent spring color which will be the trade-off.

