

The Oregonian

Home & Garden

HOT TO POT

Tuck versatile Japanese maples in snug spots

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By Sally Ruth Bourrie

You want to grow a tree, but you've thrown in the trowel because you live in an apartment, loft or home with limited space. No problem. Enter the magnificent Japanese maple.

Among its virtues:

Some start at less than a foot tall, so anyone can find space for them, even those with the tiniest balcony.

More than 400 varieties range from the familiar burgundy mounds to feathery uprights. Foliage ranges from lace-leaf to full, hand-shaped leaves to the thinnest tendrils.

Many cultivars offer four seasons of interest: spring buds kick things off in cream, pink and green variegation; leaf veining and marbling shine in summer; red, yellow and orange leaves paint fall; colored, sometimes exfoliating, bark and elegant branching patterns help make winter a wonderland.

Japanese maples love containers. In Japan, the trees have been cultivated for centuries in the most extreme of containers as bonsai.

North America saw its first Japanese maples as early as the 1820s, but the trees have become popular only in the past few decades, thanks largely to Oregonian J.D. Vertrees. He assembled and also bred the largest collection in the United States of *Acer palmatum* (the most common category), *A. japonicum* and *A. circinatum* on his one-acre property in Roseburg before he died in 1993. At last, Japanese maples could be seen outside Japan.

The assortment of colors and shapes, as well as the easy maintenance, means Japanese maples will fit almost anywhere.

Del Loucks, Oregon's current dean of Japanese maples, warns that a tree bound for container living does need some special care. "I hate to see a plant lost," says Loucks, who runs Del's Japanese Maples in Junction City, where he has 20-year-old, 3-inch-caliper trees that have lived in pots their whole lives. "At the nursery, ask questions and find out what conditions your trees need."

Other than that, the biggest challenge will be leaving the nursery with a single tree.

TIPS FOR CONTAINING JAPANESE MAPLES

Potted maples are easy to care for but need proper setup.

- Select a container that's just a little larger than what the tree comes in. Clay, plastic, wood or metal containers are fine. Most Japanese maples grow slowly, but eventually you might have to transplant to a larger pot.

- Think about siting. Many varieties can take full sun, contrary to popular belief, but reflected heat from a wall can be too much, particularly if trees aren't watered adequately.

- Drainage is critical. Any potting soil will do, but many growers amend soil with bark dust to ensure that roots do not drown in winter rains. Rock or gravel in the container's bottom facilitates drainage, too.

- Water in dry times. Japanese maples must be kept moist, which might mean daily watering when temperatures rise. If you have any doubt about amounts, buy a moisture gauge, says Debbie Pollock of Pollock & Sons Nursery in Battle Ground, Wash.

- Stick to dwarf and semi-dwarf varieties that grow no higher than 10 feet. With so many choices, ask the nursery's advice on how much sun a variety needs, how tall and wide it grows - and how fast.

- Fertilize lightly. Stewart Wilson, who owns Vertrees' garden and has about 175 cultivars, adds time-released Osmocote around March 1 (enough for the year) and warns not to fertilize after mid-July. "Japanese maples have two growth spurts, one in the spring and one in the fall," he says. "If you fertilize before fall growth, the tree will grow too much and the new shoots will be too tender to survive winter. You'll have dieback back to the spring growth."

- Protect when temperatures dip below 15 degrees. Wrap the tree and the container with burlap or other insulating material. Or bring it indoors (but to keep the tree dormant, only water a couple of times before returning it outdoors in spring).

- Prune in winter for shape and size. The Japanese Garden is an excellent place to see artistic pruning.

Sources

JAPANESE MAPLES

By J.D. Vertrees

Timber Press, 2001

The first book written in English on Japanese maples, it is in its third edition and remains the bible in the field. Easily accessible for the beginner, this book was named one of the 75 Great American Garden Books by the American Horticultural Society.

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