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How to Grow Japanese Maple Trees



Photo Credit: Liz Farmer Bedard

Botanical Name:	<i>Acer palmatum</i>
Plant Type:	Tree
Season:	Part Sun

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Planting, Growing, and Pruning Japanese Maples

By [Andy Wilcox](#)

Last Updated: August 11, 2024



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Japanese maple trees are prized for their form, bark, elegant foliage, and, above all, their fantastic fall color. Learn how to plant, grow, and care for beautiful Japanese maples.

Botanically known as *Acer palmatum*, Japanese maples share a genus with other maples like sugar and red maples.

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However, this is a smaller tree that creates height and interest without shading out shorter plants.

Japanese maples work well in perennial beds and are popular as landscape features due to their striking form, color, and manageable size. Native to Japan and South Korea, these ornamental trees invoke a peaceful feeling and are known as the trees used in Japanese tea gardens.

Their needs are similar to other maple trees, even if their shape and size differ. Dozens of Japanese maple tree cultivars are available in weeping or upright forms, with various leaf shapes and colors run-

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They are slow growers, averaging only 6 to 12 inches per year—partly because they are shockingly expensive at the nursery. They can be grown as single-stemmed trees or multi-trunk displays. Most Japanese maples are hardy in USDA zones 5 to 8.

Read Next

- [How to Grow a Maple Tree](#)
- [Types of Maple Trees: Identification Guide, Chart & Species List](#)
- [How to Grow Weigela Shrubs \(The Complete Guide\)](#)

PLANTING

While Japanese maples can be planted in either spring or fall, spring planting is preferable. Since these ornamental trees are usually purchased as containerized stock, they can be planted at any time in the growing season except in late fall. They'll need time to establish root systems and settle in before the freezing weather arrives.

Where to Plant Japanese maple

Japanese maples like partial shade; the farther south they are, the more afternoon shade is important. While a few hours of sun is vital for other-than-green varieties to keep their foliage color, too much hot sun can lead to leaf scorch.

Good drainage is essential. Avoid locations that remain wet and soggy in winter. If needed, plant these trees in a slight berm to aid drainage. While not picky about soil, they are not tolerant of salt or highly alkaline sites.

ers. They've been cultivated for use as bonsai trees and in standard planters. If you live in zone 5 or colder, bring containerized Japanese maples indoors for the winter and keep them in a location where the pot won't freeze solid.

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Japanese Maple Tree on a platform in a container. Credit: Alonia

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Planting Japanese maples like you would other young trees or shrubs.

- Remove any sod from the area or mulch from the area.
- Dig a hole the same depth as the root ball and at least twice as wide. The hole should look like a saucer, not a coffee can.
- Loosen the soil at the edges and bottom of the hole. Hard, compacted sides are difficult for roots to penetrate. A compact hardpan at the bottom will inhibit drainage.
- Carefully remove the tree from its container and prune any circling or girdling roots. If the plant is rootbound in its pot, score the root ball with a knife to stimulate new growth.
- Test fit the Japanese maple in the hole. Ensure the graft union will be above ground when the soil is returned.
- Replace the soil you removed, ensuring the tree is kept vertical while filling. Stop when the hole is filled halfway, tamp the soil around the roots to re-

- Continue filling the soil around the roots and firming it with your hands.
- Spread mulch around the tree, about 3-4 inches thick. Spread the mulch evenly in a circle, extending 2-3 feet and keeping an inch or two of separation away from the trunk. The final mulch job should be even and flat, not hilled-up.

GROWING

How to Grow Japanese Maple

Japanese maples have thin bark easily damaged by impacts from lawn mower decks, string trimmers, or other objects. Mulching around the base will keep the lawnmower away and moderate soil moisture swings.

Fertilization is not typically needed. However, if desired, apply a slow-release blend designed for trees and shrubs in spring. Avoid fertilizing in the fall, as the

How to Prune Japanese Maple

Pruning for aesthetic reasons can be done at any time of year. However, late winter is the least intrusive for the plant. Remove crossed or twisted branches, dead or wounded stems, and gangly long branches.

Watering

In general, Japanese maples have shallow roots, so they appreciate a cool, evenly moist but well-draining site. Consistent moisture is key.

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A light covering of mulch can help to conserve moisture, but keep the mulch away from the trunk. A newly planted Japanese maple should be watered thoroughly over the first few days to eliminate air pockets and settle the soil. Make sure that the area is well-draining so that the roots do not sit in water (the plants do not like wet “feet”). After that, they’ll need to be watered regularly.

Sandy or loamy soils may need water about every 2 to 4 days, while clay soils may require less frequency. Once trees become established, give the tree about 1.5 to 2.0 inches of water about every week or so, or when the soil becomes dry about 3 inches below the surface. During hot/dry spells, water slowly but deeply so that it reaches the top 12 inches of soil. When the leaves drop in fall, water once per month until the ground freezes.

How to Propagate Japanese Maples

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cold stratify 3 to 5 months. If the seeds were dry when gathered, soak them in warm water for 24-48 hours, then winter sow or cold stratify.

Gather cuttings when this year's growth has changed from soft and fleshy to firm and dense. You'll want to cut from new growth. Check about a month after your last frost date when the leaves are fully out. Some cultivars root more reliably than others.

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If possible, take cuttings from young trees—they root much more reliably. If you

lower success rate. Keep cuttings in water until ready to stick—don't allow them to dry out once cut.

- Take cuttings 6-8 inches long and cut just below a node. Ideally, there will be 2-3 nodes on the stem.
- Strip lower leaves and scrape the bottom 1-2 inches of the cutting with a knife's edge.
- Dip the bottom a few inches in 1-2% strength IBA powder or solution.
- Use a pencil to poke holes in the growing medium, stick the cuttings about two inches deep, and firm the soil around them. A mixture of equal parts coco coir and perlite works well.
- Japanese maple cuttings will need to be misted. If you don't have a timed mist system (most of us don't), you can imitate it with a humidity dome or a plastic bag and frequent misting with a spray bottle.
- Don't let the plastic touch the leaves. Use sticks or pencils to prop up the sides. The goal is for the leaf surface to

- Leave rooted cuttings undisturbed through the following winter dormant period.

Types

- ‘Bloodgood’ provides a burgundy color all summer before turning red in autumn. This small tree is hardy in zones 5-8 and reaches 15-20 feet tall with an open, layered appearance.
- ‘Crimson Queen’ is a weeping variety with fine burgundy foliage. It reaches 10-12 feet wide but only about 10 feet tall.
- ‘Wolff’ or ‘Emperor I’ is one of the more cold-tolerant cultivars. Crimson foliage and dark red-black bark provide a striking display when planted in perennial beds.

GARDENING PRODUCTS



PESTS/DISEASES

Japanese maples do not suffer from many pests and diseases but can succumb to root rot if planted in soils with poor drainage.

WIT AND WISDOM

- Most Japanese maples sold today are grafted, so take care not to plant them too deeply or cover the graft union with mulch.

plant (monoecious).

- In some regions of Japan, the leaves are preserved in salt and then tempura-fried as a sweet snack!

SHRUBS AND TREES

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andy Wilcox



Andy Wilcox is a flower farmer and master gardener with a passion for soil health, small producers, forestry, and horticulture.

[Read More from Andy Wilcox](#)

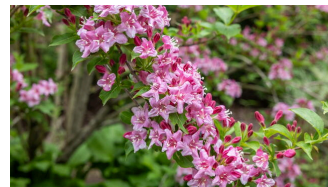
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COMMENTS

ADD A COMMENT

Marci (not verified) 9 months 2 weeks ago

Helpful info but I was hoping to learn how much water my japanese maple wants.

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REPLY

The Editors 9 months 2 weeks ago

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Hope this helps!

REPLY

Tara Caldwell (not verified) 1 year ago

I've got a Japanese maple that looks pretty bad. Is there someone I can send a picture to for advice?

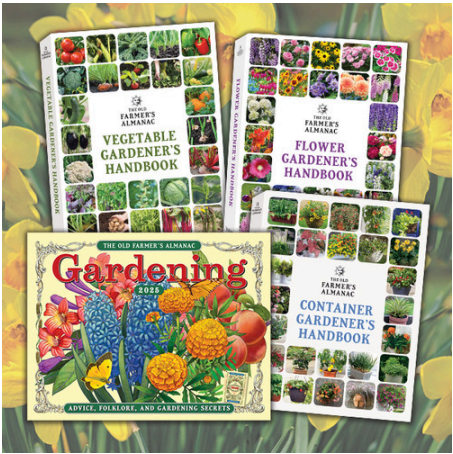
REPLY

The Editors 1 year ago

It would be a great idea to contact an arborist in your area. They would have a good idea of how to handle a Japanese Maple in your particular climate.

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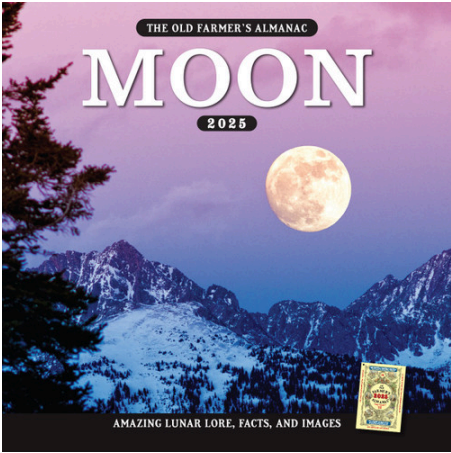
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