

EASTERN REDBUD

Cercis canadensis L.

Plant Symbol = CECA4

Contributed By: USDA NRCS National Plant Data Center



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Alternate names

Redbud, Judas tree; this species has several varieties recognized in the U.S.: *Cercis canadensis* var. *canadensis*, *Cercis canadensis* var. *mexicana*, and *Cercis canadensis* var. *texensis*.

Uses

Ethnobotanic: The Alabama, Cherokee, Delaware, Kiowa, and Oklahoma were among the Native American tribes that used eastern redbud for various purposes. The bark was made into a tea to treat whooping cough. Taking cold infusions of the roots and inner bark treated fevers and congestion. An infusion of the bark was used to treat vomiting and fever. During winters, the plants were used for firewood. Because it is one of the first plants to flower in the spring, the blossoming branches were brought into the homes to “drive winter out.” Children were “fond of eating the blossoms” of eastern redbud.

Wildlife/Livestock: Many birds, including bobwhite quails, eat the seeds. White-tailed deer are among the animals that browse the foliage. Honeybees visit the blossoms. Livestock will browse on Eastern redbud.

Status

Please consult the PLANTS Web site and your State Department of Natural Resources for this plant's

current status (e.g. threatened or endangered species, state noxious status, and wetland indicator values).

Description

General: Legume Family (Fabaceae). Eastern redbud is a native, perennial, deciduous tree or shrub. The plants may vary in form from dense and round (to 6 m tall) when grown in sun, to an open, taller form (to 12 m tall) when grown in the shade. The trees produce hundreds of small pink pea flowers in the very early spring, even before other trees have leafed out. The bright magenta-pink to lilac flowers, appear in small clusters, primarily on older stems. The flowers are irregular, 9 to 12 cm long, with ten stamens. The unique, broadly heart-shaped leaves are nearly circular (5 to 10 cm), with a long, slender petiole. The leaves are alternate and have 5 to 9 prominent veins that radiate palmately from the base. New leaves are a light green that darken with age and finally turn yellow in the fall. The seeds are contained in a flat, thin pod (4 to 10 cm long), which turns from green to brown.

Distribution: Eastern redbud is native to the eastern and south-central United States, southward to Texas. For current distribution, please consult the Plant Profile page for this species on the PLANTS Web site.

Habitat: Eastern redbud occurs in the forest understory in moist rich woods, along the banks of streams, in ravines, on bluffs, in open rocky woods, and abandoned farmlands.

Establishment

Eastern redbud is widely cultivated as an ornamental because of the plants showy springtime flowers and beautiful heart-shaped leaves. The plants are graceful with arching branches that look lovely as a specimen tree, in groupings, and in shrub borders. The plants do well in soils of moderate to low fertility and are very drought resistant. The seeds have very hard seed coats that require both chilling and scarification for germination, unless planted in the fall. Cuttings are difficult to root. Mature plants do not transplant well so buy young plants that are balled-and-burlapped or container grown. Transplant the plants in the spring or fall, in well-drained soils in sun to part shade. Water the plants regularly until established.

Management

These plants require very little maintenance. The brown seedpods, which can cling to the branches until late in the year, can be somewhat unattractive.

Pests and Potential Problems

Eastern redbud has relatively few pests. Stem canker, leaf spots, and verticillium wilt may be a problem. The plants may experience some insect damage from leaf rollers, treehoppers, scales, leafhoppers, aphids, and spider mites, but damage is rarely severe.

Cultivars, Improved and Selected Materials (and area of origin)

These plant materials are readily available from commercial sources. Contact your local Natural Resources Conservation Service (formerly Soil Conservation Service) office for more information. Look in the phone book under "United States Government." The Natural Resources Conservation Service will be listed under the subheading "Department of Agriculture."

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Edited: 27sep01 jsp; 01may03 ahv; 01jun06 jsp

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