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# Why aren't the leaves falling off Japanese maples?

## Gardening Q&A with George Weigel



The leaves have browned on this Japanese maple but they're not dropping off. (George Weigel)



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**Q:** I have a Japanese maple that has been in my front yard and perfectly healthy since before we purchased our home almost 25 years ago. Every fall, the purple leaves turn red and almost on cue, they all fall off the tree within three days, covering the ground in a carpet of red. But not this year.

Here it is, almost the end of the year, and every leaf is completely brown but still attached to the tree. This is very puzzling. I'm not sure if this means a problem with the tree and not sure if others have had this problem as well this year.

**A:** I've seen a good bit of that this fall with Japanese maples (as well as barberries, hydrangeas, weigelas and more), so you're not alone. The failure to drop leaves isn't a good sign, but I don't think it's going to be a serious or deadly threat.

What I suspect happened is that the cold spell we had in early November froze maple-leaf and maple-twig cells before they had a chance to complete their normal winter-prepping process.

As days shorten and temperatures gradually cool, leaves stop producing chlorophyll and expose the pigments that give maples their bright red fall foliage. At the same time, the branches start to form "abscission" cells that push off the dying leaves (aided by wind) and seal the little openings where the stems attach.

A sudden cold snap can short-circuit that process. Not only does the leaf color go directly from green to brown, the leaves stay attached because abscission tissue hadn't sufficiently developed.

Some botanists suggest that small, understory trees like Japanese maples are more prone to this abnormal leaf-hanging because they take longer to get ready for winter with the protection of taller trees overhead.

Other species do this routinely... keep their leaves through most of winter. Oak, beech and hornbeam are three species that often hold brown leaves all winter.

The main thing I'd be concerned about is if wind rips the leaves off in early winter, leaving behind not-quite-sealed openings that normal abscission would've prevented. That could lead to more moisture loss from the tree than normal. When combined with the very dry September and drier-than-usual October, that's not an ideal situation.

Here's what I'd do: 1.) Don't try to remove the brown leaves by hand; 2.) Don't spray anything on the tree or fertilize it over winter, and 3.) Give the ground a good soaking once or twice over winter if we hit a dry, unfrozen period.

The brown leaves should drop on their own at winter's end when new leaves start growing. Unless your tree has other issues or has gone exceptionally dry for too long, my guess is that it'll go back to growing normally next spring.

If you want to read more about the biology behind leaf-dropping and leaf-hanging, [Penn State Extension](#) has a good online fact sheet about it.

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