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Selection and Care of Japanese Maples

The Japanese maple is probably one of the most popular and beautiful of the small under story trees. Its beauty in all seasons is probably its most endearing feature. The spring brings the new growth with variations in color from crimson to bright lime green. In winter, its small-branched twiggy habit makes it a perfect place to hang your Christmas lights. Fall is when they show off their beautiful autumn foliage. So for any season of the year it is the perfect compliment to a beautiful landscape.

Japanese maples are adaptable to many soil and climactic conditions from the rainforest and Pacific Northwest to Southern California. Hardy to 0 degrees F, the root zone will only tolerate about 14 degrees F before damage will occur. Containerized specimens may be especially susceptible to having their roots zones frozen. Mulching will help the plant by insulating it from the cold. Japanese maples are used as specimen and companion plants which rarely attain great height and are therefore considered 'under story trees' as opposed to shade trees.

Companion plants would include acid-loving plants such as rhododendrons, azaleas, kalmias and dwarf conifers as well as many woodland perennials and bulbs. Japanese maples also blend well with shrubs and perennials which prefer more neutral soils. Most do not, however, tolerate extremely alkaline conditions.

Sun Tolerance and Placements

Green varieties will take full sun very well. They may sunburn in late summer conditions, so afternoon shade is preferable. Variegated leaf forms need semi-shade or at least protection from late afternoon hot sun in summer (July through the end of August). Red varieties appreciate some shade, but will keep their color better with strong sun for part of the day.

Try to place your Japanese maple in a protected area away from exposed, windy sites. When planting near a wall, reflected sun may burn the leaves in summer. Allow for mature spread when considering placement near a building.

Planting and Soils

The soil for planting Japanese maples must be well-drained. They do not do well in a wet or swampy location. The addition of Black Forest or other organic material at planting will help loosen clay soils and improve drainage. We recommend the use of a starter fertilizer (such as Dr. Earth). We do not recommend the use of chemical fertilizers or pre-emergents for weed control as these have been known to damage the plant. The addition of an amendment that contains mycorrhizal fungi (such as Plant Success tablets) or Messenger will also help your maple to better withstand the shock of transplant and increase its immunity. If planting in very heavy clay soil with poor drainage,

mound soil around the root zone creating a raised area to improve the drainage. Mulching is suggested for winter protection of the roots, as well as water retention in the summer. Do not cover the trunk with mulch!

Watering

Japanese maples have fibrous root systems and are not overly competitive with companion shrubs and perennials. It is because of these delicate roots that Japanese maples require even moisture within the root zone. Water early in the morning or in the early evening, to prevent water on the leaves in the full sun. They appreciate deep watering perhaps once a week during the summer months rather than frequent light watering.

Containers must also be watched during extreme cold temperatures. Water acts as a natural insulator, so do not discontinue watering in the winter.

Pruning

Thoughtful pruning and shaping should be done each year. Major pruning should be done in late February or early March before breaking dormancy, but pruning of smaller branches for shaping may be done at any time. Be sure to sterilize tools between cuts to avoid the spread of disease (1 T. bleach in a one quart sprayer). Make the cut as close to the branch as possible so as not to leave a 'stub.' Remove fine, twiggy growth coming from the center of the plant to enhance the overall natural form throughout the growing season. Most forms of Japanese maple benefit from early thinning of dead inner branches. Die back of lower and inner branches is normal because of lack of light. You should also prune out crossing branch or ones that show obvious signs of disease.

Pest and Diseases

Japanese maples are relatively disease and insect free. Spraying with a dormant copper spray in November after leaf drop is a good all around preventative. Verticillium wilt is a serious soil born fungal disease causing die back and ultimately death of the plant. (There is no cure for this disease but keeping your tree healthy and the use of fertilizer with beneficial microbes and fungi (such as Dr. Earth will help.) After losing a plant to this disease, do not attempt to plant another Japanese maple in the same location. Meticulous sanitation in pruning and clean-up will help control the spread of this disease. Do not compost diseased plant material. In the Pacific Northwest where late frosts are not uncommon, Japanese maples may experience branch die back where buds have begun to break dormancy during a previous warm spell. A certain amount of die back is normal and should be expected, so do not assume the worst. Trim back dead branches after the plant has leafed out.

Fertility

Japanese maples do not require large amounts of fertilizer. If the soils are generally suitable for most landscape plants, the maples will do well with little or no attention. Aged barnyard manure or compost as an annual topdressing in spring is all your plants will need. Chemical fertilizers will trigger excessive weak growth which can promote disease. A balanced (all purpose) organic fertilizer (such as Dr. Earth) is recommended to boost soil fertility in areas where other plants perform poorly.

We know that you will enjoy your Japanese maple for many years to come. If you have any questions please call us at (360) 225-8750.