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Japanese Maples, The Dwarf Acers

By James Kilkelly

I have been known to rant on about how people should try to include more native plants within their garden. However, I would never dissuade someone from including a Japanese maple within his or her garden; on the contrary, I would heartily recommend it.

History and colour

The image of a Japanese maple in full leaf brings to my mind images of oriental calmness, still water and moss covered mountains. This elegant plant is a distinct part of the culture and consciousness of its native Japan through its use in both horticulture and art. In the year 1800, over 200 varieties of this plant were noted in Japan, this figure grew over the next 100 years, only to have those numbers knocked back again to 200 by the maelstrom of the second world war. Japanese maples also known as *Acer palmatum* or *Acer japonicum* are diminutive in stature compared to other trees. Heights range from 1 metre to 7 metres, leading many gardeners to class them as large shrubs rather than small trees. Words cannot do justice to the colour displayed by a Japanese maple; it must be seen to be believed. An Acer owner will experience fiery new spring growth, calm summer foliage and even fierier autumn chilled leaves.

Palmate or Dissectum

There are two main groups of Japanese maple. The "Palmate" group has a reasonably upright growth habit with layered branches and leaves that are made up of five to nine lobes. The "Dissectum" group rightly lives up to its name with its lobed leaves dissected, feathered and lace-like. I feel that the maples in the "Dissectum" group look particularly well if planted close by an informal water feature due mainly to their weeping, cascading form.

How to grow a dwarf acer

Japanese maples do well if planted in an east facing aspect, allowing it access to the morning sun and protecting it from the mid-day sun. Shelter from winds and a moist but free draining soil are also important cultivation requirements. A 7cm layer of bark mulch applied to the plants base will help

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prevent the plant drying out. To enable good growth you must feed your little piece of the orient, apply a liquid fertiliser in mid–spring and again in mid–summer at half strength. As these Acers are shallow rooted, they are ideal for planting amongst other shrubs with no check to growth. For a delightful oriental scene, try planting *Acer palmatum* with rhododendrons, azalea, bamboo and birch.

Specimens for container growing

Two beautiful specimen maples whose leaves are opening out within garden centres now are "Orange Dream" and "Beni–Maiko". "Orange Dream" is worth mentioning due to its fresh yellow/green lobed leaves. The young growing tips have an orange glow, providing an attractive contrast. "Beni–Maiko" on the other hand produces lovely pink foliage in spring turning to dark red in summer. Both of these Acers grow to around 1 metre tall, an ideal size for container growing. If you choose to grow a Japanese maple in a container, try to select one that is sympathetic to the plants heritage, a glazed oriental style pot would be ideal.

James Kilkelly runs a professional garden design service in Galway, Ireland. He has a regular gardening column in a Irish regional newspaper. Visit his website at

<http://www.gardenplansireland.com/>

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Original Article:

<http://www.gardenplansireland.com/articles/article20.html>

Growing Japanese Bonsai Trees for Bonsai Gardens

By Christopher Chase

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As you go through the history of Japanese bonsai trees (among others), you will note that this term is used to refer to a 'plant in a pot'. As per the information provided on Harvard's Arnold Arboretum site, "the ancient Chinese were the first to miniaturize trees for ornamental purposes, around A.D. 200. Later, the Japanese, who used it to create beautiful gardens, adopted the bonsai technique.

Basically, the bonsai are outdoor plants and they flourish in cool and humid conditions, away from the bright sunlight for most parts of the day. In case you want to keep them indoors, you have to create the same cool and humid environment for them; otherwise they tend to wither away.

Podocarpus, Serissa and dwarf Pomegranate are suitable for bonsai along with some common plants,

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such as Schefflera, jade plant, Ficus benjamina, Bougainvillea, Citrus and Hibiscus. You can also make bonsai out of several woody herb species like bay, rosemary, myrtle and lavender.

How to care for your Japanese Bonsai Trees

All bonsai need a light and well-draining soil, but the actual soil can vary from plant to plant. So, the soil mixture suitable for growing bald cypress (*Taxodium distichum*) cannot be considered ideal for cultivating the southern red cedar (*Juniperus virginiana*).

A typical bonsai soil mixture comprises 1/3 part coarse sand to help the drainage of excess water; 1/3 part organic matter like ground sphagnum moss or pine or fir bark, which are capable to hold moisture and nutrients and 1/3 part a coarse, fired clay like Turface that also has the capacity to hold nutrients and moisture. You can adjust the proportions according to the needs of your trees.

You can select any suitable place, such as the terrace to create your traditional Japanese garden. Planning an outdoor Japanese garden is an intellectual pursuit that also requires artistic visualization and imagination. The key element of its lay out and planning is that you should not let the gardener's personality influence the garden. In this way, the viewers can visualize the garden in their own distinct ways. Another core element is simplicity in terms of the design and lay out.

Don't keep anything that competes with the décor of the garden or distracts the attention of the viewers away from the garden.

In your bonsai garden, you can plant clumps of *Fargesia nitida*, a pretty clumping bamboo. Japanese maples are also ideal and they can be transplanted into containers as well. In order to make your bonsai garden look more natural, you can put some moss over the soil beneath your bonsai tree that will look like real grass. To promote the growth of your bonsai, you have to rewire the bonsai every year and trim its center roots after one year.

Things to remember about Japanese Bonsai trees

When you see a bonsai, you must remember that it is a Japanese expression that refers to an artificially miniaturized potted plant or collection of plants, which are cultivated to recreate a natural scene. Generally, a twelve inches tall bonsai having an outcropping of strong roots can give the appearance of a very old tree.

Likewise, a symmetrical crown adorning the top of a straight trunk can provide the impression of a stately and ancient shade tree. The Japanese people possess centuries old dwarf trees and hand it over to the next generation as their living heirlooms.

About the Author: Christopher Chase is a respected Bonsai enthusiast. He is the author of dozens of articles on the subject of Bonsai, subjects include Shohin Bonsai, Bonsai and Suiseki and Bonsai Art.



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