

The stately Red Maple is a native beauty

STRESS-PROOF PLANTS

By Brian Maynard

Rhode Island's state tree, the native red or swamp maple, *Acer rubrum*, also happens to be a tough tree, very appropriate to this series on stress-proof plants.

Red maples grow in the swamps and wet bottomlands so characteristic of our state, but also venture into forests and rocky uplands from Newfoundland to Florida and Texas — a testament to the great variation of adaptation found in this tree.

The key to success in growing red maples lies in exploiting its variety of hardiness, drought tolerance, form and fall color, which ranges from brilliant oranges to vivid pinks and deep reds.

Growing 40 to 80 feet tall and three quarters as wide, this medium-sized tree makes an excellent specimen for residential or urban settings.

Red maples tolerate both poor drainage

The most popular red maple cultivar marketed today is Red Sunset, an upright-spreading tree developing an oval outline.

Will Green

HARDY SPECIMEN: This columnar red maple, *Acer Rubrum*, graces Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, Mass.

and drought, yet are notoriously sensitive to road salt and alkaline soils, where a manganese deficiency causes a yellowing of the foliage. They can tolerate winter temperatures to -40 degrees.

Crimson flowers clustered at twig tips signal the approach of spring, and likewise red maple leaves brilliantly signal the onset of autumn.

Another northeastern native, the Eastern white pine, makes an excellent backdrop for this show of orange and red fall foliage.

The many attractive selections of red maple are commonly grafted, but delayed graft failure has been a problem with some cultivars, and nursery growers are striving to produce red maple cultivars from cuttings started in early summer.

Spring planting methods

In the spring, trees to 6 feet tall may be transplanted bare root, while larger specimens should be purchased balled and burlapped.

The most popular red maple cultivar marketed today is Red Sunset, an upright-spreading tree developing an oval outline.

Its lustrous summer foliage turns an intense red and orange-red in the fall. Silver bark provides winter interest as well.

Red Sunset is also sold as Franks Red and does not suffer graft incompatibility.

October Glory and Armstrong are also common.

October Glory has a nice summer foliage turning a deep crimson red and hanging on for weeks after other red maples have lost their leaves.

However, October Glory is less cold hardy and early frost can put a damper on this fall show.

Columnar form is useful

Armstrong is a columnar form useful in tight spaces and formal settings.

A selection worth seeking out is Autumn Flame, a seedless cultivar which has smaller leaves and a dense rounded crown.

Autumn Flame develops its orange-red fall color rapidly and uniformly, and so appears to color up earlier than other red maples.

Remember to include a red maple in your landscape. It is a native plant species, beloved state tree.

Brian Maynard is an assistant professor of plant sciences at the University of Rhode Island. This series on stress-tolerant trees and shrubs is a project of the Rhode Island Nurserymen's Association.