

Momijigari, autumn leaves viewing

at the Seattle Japanese Garden

Continuing Education

2024

Class Description

Fall is the perfect time for visitors to discover the beautiful maples that grow in the Seattle Japanese Garden. As guides we can contribute to their enjoyment of the maples through learning about the history and lore surrounding the maples. This class features 11 maples that will be highlighted by garden signs during the Maple festivities, Oct 3rd through the 13th. Class handouts describing the maples will be sent to registered participants prior to the class and will be referenced during the garden walk through for a fun and educational morning!

Dedication

The Plant Committee dedicates this class to the memory of Aleks Monk who passed away in late July. Aleks was a founding member of the Plant Committee and a dedicated participant in all of the committee's projects. Aleks loved *haiku* poetry and entered the Moon Viewing *Haiku* Contest several times. She received an award in 2018 for this *haiku*.

in my inbox

message from the full moon:

—not coming tonight!

As a guide, she shared her enthusiasm and knowledge with the garden visitors. As a leader, she created visitor friendly brochures highlighting seasonal plants such as 'SJG April Rhododendrons and Azaleas' and 'SJG Maples'. Aleks also created the SJG Bloom Blog, devoting countless hours over many years to this online resource with photographs and descriptions of hundreds of the plants in the garden – in both alphabetical order and by month. She was an avid and skilled photographer and many of her photographs are included in these class materials.

Maples in Japanese Culture

The Japanese tell a story about Sen-no-Rikyū, the 16th century tea master famous for transforming the tea ceremony from ostentation into a simpler Zen aesthetic: When he was a tea-novice, the tea master Taken Jōō instructed him to rake the tea garden as a preliminary test. Rikyū raked it clean. Yet, feeling the garden sterile, he shook the adjacent maple tree to scatter a few seasonal leaves.

Maples have long been appreciated in Japan. The *Manyōshū*, a Nara period compilation of early *waka* (pre-haiku) poetry, includes a poem by Princess Nukata (ca. 660-690) debating whether spring blossoms are lovelier than autumn's "prized" leaves - she chooses the fall. The *Komakurabe* scroll (depicting social events in 1024 Kyoto) contains an image of a maple tree in a mansion courtyard with maple leaves floating in the adjacent stream. The *Sakuteiki* (c. 1028-1094), the oldest book on Japanese gardens (or indeed any residential garden) directs that plants with "pleasing fall colors," likely a reference to maples, be planted in the west part of the garden.

The natural variability of *Acer palmatum* leaves has led to the development of hundreds of cultivars of this species over the centuries. During the Edo period (1603-1867) the number of maple cultivars surged as private gardens were developed. The *Chikinshō*, published in 1695, is one of the earliest known books giving descriptions of different Japanese maples, and by the end of the Edo period there were as many as 250 named cultivars of *A. palmatum*. Many hundreds of *A. palmatum* cultivars now exist throughout the world.

What is a Japanese maple

"Japanese maple," as used now by the public and landscapers, most often refers to *Acer palmatum* and *Acer japonicum* species. The 2024 Seattle Japanese Garden plant inventory lists 24 *A. palmatum* cultivars and two *A. japonicum* cultivars, out of a total of 36 distinct maples.

Maple Colors and Form

Maple trees are prized for their color. 'Momiji', one Japanese name for *Acer palmatum*, is possibly derived from the ancient form of the verb *momizu* meaning "becomes crimson leaved."

In maples with green spring leaves their green chlorophyll pigment dominates the existing but latent carotenoids and tannin pigments until the chlorophyll fades in the fall due to waning daylight, lower night temperatures, and changes in moisture. The carotenoids and tannins then turn the leaves yellow, orange, russet, and brown. Red fall tints come from the later production of anthocyanin, which occurs only in select trees based on genetics. Trees that start with red leaves in the spring, such as *A. palmatum* var. *dissectum* (our striking entry plant), take on a bronzy green tinge in the summer, as chlorophyll asserts itself, and then become a brilliant crimson in the fall, as the chlorophyll recedes.

Maple leaves grow opposite each other on the branch and usually have 5-7 lobes (bumps on the leaf edge) that radiate like a palm (palmately) from a common point on the leaf stem. These lobes may be sharply divided all the way to the stem, creating a lacey effect (*A. palmatum* var. *dissectum*), or so minimally cut that the leaf seems circular with just a pinking shears-like edge (*A. japonicum* – full moon maple). A few species have a compound leaf made of delicate leaflets, instead of lobed leaves (*A. griseum* – paperbark maple).

All maples' fruit appears in distinctive sheath with paired wings (samara), though some are delicate with close V-shaped wings, while other wings are very large and almost horizontal, like a propeller (*A. circinatum* – Vine Maple).

With the variety of stunning maple colors and shapes, during Momijigari we can all agree with Princess Nukata: "For me, the autumn hills!"

Other Maples Featured during the Garden's Maple Festival

***Acer palmatum* 'Tsuma gaki'**

Acer palmatum 'Tsuma gaki' is renowned for the beauty of its spring leaves. Yellow-green with pointed scarlet tips, and divided into 5-7 lobes, they appear to be drooping from their stems—like “leaf hands” with red-painted nails (the meaning of *tsuma gaki*). Summer's dark green leaves sometimes turn bright red in fall, but this varies from one year to the next. At maturity (20-25 years), 'Tsuma gaki' will be about 12 feet tall and wide, with a dense, layered and rounded habit.



[The Garden's most prominent specimen is on the east side of the pond, in Area D; a second tree is located along the west side fence in Area ZZW.]



***Acer nikoense* (aka *Acer maximowiczianum*)**

Commonly known as Nikko maple, this deciduous tree is native to Japan and China. It grows to about 50 feet tall in the wild but is usually smaller in gardens. It has dark gray bark and three-lobed foliage. In spring the brownish leaves are covered with a thick down. They mature to dark green in summer before turning red-orange or pinkish red in autumn. The three lobes separate as they fall.

[The Garden has one plant, located in Area U at the south end of the cherry orchard.]

***Acer palmatum* 'Shigitatsu sawa'**

This cultivar is noted for the beautiful patterning of its foliage, which has been compared to stained glass windows. The toothed, slightly cupped leaves have 7-9 lobes that taper to sharp points. They are light yellow-green with prominent darker veins. When their color darkens in mid-summer, this “reticulation” is less prominent. 'Shigitatsu sawa' does best when protected from hot sun, but when grown in too much shade, its typical rich red or orange fall color fails to develop.



[The Garden has one plant, located along the west side fence in Area ZZW.]



***Acer japonicum* 'Aconitifolium'**

This full moon maple cultivar matures as a round-topped tree about 20 feet tall by 15 feet wide. Its large, 11-lobed leaves are longer than wide and irregularly dissected, creating a bold, fern-like appearance—hence the common name, fernleaf full moon maple. (The cultivar name, 'Aconitifolium', acknowledges its leaves' resemblance to those of *Aconitum*, the perennial known as monkshood.)

In Japan, this lovely tree is known as “dancing peacock maple” (*mai kujaku*), a reference to its

bold and deeply cut, yet delicate leaves, moving gracefully in the wind. Bright green in spring, they mature to a deeper green in summer before turning fiery shades of orange, red, burgundy, and purple in autumn.

[The Garden has one plant, located along the west side fence in Area ZZW.]

(Photos by Aleks Monk)

MAPLE CLASS RESOURCES (2024)

BOOKS & BOOKLETS

- De Bary, Wm. Theodore, ed. *The Manyōshū Nippon Gakujutsu Shinkodai Translation of One Thousand Poems*. Columbia University Press, New York, 1965 (original 1940).
- Dirr, Michael. *Manual of Woody Landscape Plants: Their Identification, Ornamental Characteristics, Culture, Propagation and Uses*. Champaign, ILL: Stipes Publishing Company, 2009.
- Glattstein, Judy. *Enhance Your Garden with Japanese Plants: A Practical Sourcebook*. New York, New York: Kodansha America, Inc., 1996.
- Gregory, Peter. "Acer capillipes Maximowicz (1867)." Originally published in The Maple Society Newsletter, Winter 1997. [<https://maplesociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/capillipesGregory-vf.pdf>]
- Gregory, Peter and J. D. Vertrees. *Japanese Maples: The Complete Guide to Selection and Cultivation, 4th Edition*. Portland, Oregon: Timber Press, 2009. See also the 3rd edition of this seminal work, published in 2001 and also revised and expanded by Peter Gregory.
- Kitamura, Fumio and Yurio Ishizu. *Garden Plants in Japan*. Tokyo: Chiyoda Publishing and Printing Company, Ltd., 1963.
- Levy-Yamamori, Ran and Gerard Taaffe. *Garden Plants of Japan*. Portland: Timber Press, 2004.
- le Hardy de Beaulieu, Antoine. *An Illustrated Guide to Maples*. Portland: Timber Press, 2001.
- "Maples: A Class for Seattle Japanese Garden Guides" (2013). Produced by the Plant Committee of Arboretum Foundation Unit 86.
- Miner, Earl. *An Introduction to Japanese Court Poetry*. Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 1968.
- Mulligan, Brian. *Woody Plants in the University of Washington Arboretum Washington Park*. Seattle: Frayn Printing Co., 1977.
- *Plants of the Seattle Japanese Garden* (2023). Produced by the Plant Committee of Arboretum Foundation Unit 86.
- Richards, Betty W. and Anne Kaneko. *Japanese Plants: Know Them & Use Them*. Tokyo: Shufunotomo Co., Ltd, 1988.
- Takei, Jiro and Marc Peter Keane. *Sakuteiki, Visions of the Japanese Garden*. Tuttle Publishing, Tokyo, 2008.
- van Gelderen, C.J. and D.M. van Gelderen. *Maples for Gardens: A Color Encyclopedia*. Portland, OR: Timber Press, 1999.

WEBSITES

- Arnold Arboretum [arboretum.harvard.edu]
- Great Plant Picks [greatplantpicks.org]
- Japanese Garden UWBG Collection Survey (2012) by Raymond Larson, University of Washington Botanic Gardens Curator and Associate Director.
- Missouri Botanical Garden [missouribotanicalgarden.org]
- North Carolina Extension Gardener Plant Toolbox [<https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/>]
- Oregon State Landscape Plants [oregonstate.edu/dept/ldplants/]
- Seattle Japanese Garden Community Blog [<https://seattlejapanesegardencommunityblog.blogspot.com/>]
- Seattle Japanese Garden Community Bloom Blog [sjgbloom2012.wordpress.com]
- Seattle Japanese Garden website. [seattlejapanesegarden.org]

- Blog articles on *Acer palmatum* cultivars (*dissectum*, 'Koto-no-ito', 'Samidare', 'Tsuma gaki') and on *Acer griseum*.
- Blog article titled "The Seattle Japanese Garden Then and Now, Part Three: The Maple Collection."
- Resources page: "Maple Collection."
- United States National Arboretum [usna.usda.gov] "The Science of Color in Autumn Leaves." (October 6, 2011)
- University of Washington Botanic Gardens Living Collection Search [https://depts.washington.edu/uwbg/gardens/bgbase.php]
- WSU Pacific Northwest Plants: Database System [pnwplants.wsu.edu]
- Wikipedia website [wikipedia.org]

Japanese Garden Maples

