pinch myself once in awhile when I think about where I live and do most of my work. Not only does our maritime Northwest climate support a wider variety of garden flora than just about any other place on earth, but many types of plants perform better here than they do anywhere outside their native habitats. Japanese maples (Acer palmatum) are a great example.

And they don’t just grow well—they grow beautifully. Is there a more lovely tree? With elegant forms, delicate leaves, and captivating colors in spring, summer and fall, Japanese maples can be living works of art.

History
The straight species Acer palmatum is a small tree growing from about 30 to 40 feet tall with a low-branched, vase-shaped form. It inhabits the understories and edges of moist forests in Japan and adjacent parts of mainland East Asia. In appearance, ecology and propensity for dramatic fall color, Japanese maple bear a striking similarity to our native vine maple (Acer circinatum).

The Japanese began selecting wild specimens of the tree they called momiji for cultivation several centuries ago. Inclusion of the tree near a house or temple became one of the central principles in the art of Japanese garden design. Acer palmatum was “discovered” and
given its scientific name by Swedish botanist Carl Thunberg in 1820, whereby he introduced it to Europe. The Japanese maple arrived in the Northwest through this European route but saw a big boost in popularity as it began to appear in Japanese gardens built around our area during the mid-20th century.

Which One to Grow?

As Japanese maples blaze with color all around us on crisp autumn days, it can be hard to resist the temptation to go buy one for our own garden. But how do we choose from among the more than 1000 recognized varieties that might show up in our local nurseries?

Because of the tree’s popularity and long history of cultivation, the variety of available cultivars is dizzying. There are upright and weeping forms. Leaves appear in linear, lace-leaf, and palmate (hand-like) shapes—in colors ranging from basic green to burgundy, white, chartreuse and even pink. There are varieties that grow no taller than two feet, and others that reach 30 feet. Fall color can range from light yellow to orange, red and deep purple. Choosing a Japanese maple can be an intimidating prospect, even for a plant expert.

Following are profiles of five Japanese maple cultivars that I have come to rely on over time for both stunning beauty and excellent local garden performance. There are surely many other great varieties worth growing, but these few have risen to the top of my list after much trial and error. They represent a variety of sizes, colors and forms, but have a few things in common: 1) good performance in most garden situations; 2) availability in the local nursery trade; 3) lovely fall color; 4) elegant form; and 5) reasonable size.

**Acer palmatum ‘Osakazuki’**

- **Size:** 20–25 feet tall
- **Form:** oval-rounded
- **Leaf shape:** palmate
- **Fall color:** bright red

*RHS Award of Garden Merit*  
*Great Plant Picks*

Of all the cultivars listed here, this is the one that most mirrors the oval-rounded form and overall size and appearance of the straight species. The leaves are true green, medium-sized and palmate (hand-shaped), like the wild maples growing in the forests of Japan. The overall effect is vigorous, lush and traditional. Its notable feature: fall color! ‘Osakazuki’ colors up more reliably and dramatically than any...
other Japanese maple I know of—with a vibrant crimson that is retained for a long time on the foliage, before it drops and paints the ground plane red. This tree is equally at home anchoring the corner of the front yard or providing dappled shade over a patio. If fall color is your main goal, and you have a bit of room, this is a great choice.

**Acer palmatum ‘Hogyoku’**
- **Size:** 15–18 feet tall
- **Form:** vase-shaped
- **Leaf shape:** palmate
- **Fall color:** orange-yellow

In almost any aesthetic realm, there are subjects that, while not attention-grabbing or even notable, convey a sense of beauty, serenity and balanced perfection. We describe them as having “understated elegance” or “classic beauty.” I cannot tell you why I love this tree so much. It does not have an unusual foliage shape or color. It is average in form and size. The fall color, a serviceable orange-yellow, is not outstanding. ‘Hogyoku’ is just a beautiful tree. The name means “jewel” in Japanese and seems apt. The edges of the foliage curl under slightly, giving each leaf a more substantial feel, and the leaves—even in summer—seem to have more of a golden undertone than other green-leaved varieties. Otherwise, I can’t explain it, except to say that, like a jewel, this tree is something to be treasured. If someone asked me to recommend a Japanese maple cultivar without any preconceived notions about color or leaf texture, this is the one I would suggest.

**Acer palmatum ‘Villa Taranto’**
- **Size:** 10–12 feet tall
- **Form:** narrow vase
- **Leaf shape:** palmate, narrow-linear lobes
- **Fall color:** yellow

You may ask why this maple’s cultivar name is not a Japanese word like most others. It was not selected in Japan but by gardeners at Villa Taranto outside Milan, Italy. This is a cultivar from the Linearlobum Group, having deeply divided leaves with linear lobes resembling the foliage of bamboo. Texture and color come together in a captivating way here: The leaves emerge reddish and fade to green, resulting in a multi-colored effect that makes the tree feel like it is being lit from within. It is both small and upright, and I have had great luck squeezing it into a narrow planting bed between a fence and patio. If you like reddish foliage but aren’t quite ready for the opaque, inky purple of some of the more popular burgundy-leaved cultivars, this may fit the bill. ‘Villa Taranto’ is both eye-catching and subtly elegant. Fall color is golden yellow.

**Acer palmatum ‘Koto-no-ito’**
- **Size:** 12—15 feet tall
- **Form:** vase-shaped
- **Leaf Shape:** palmate, narrow-linear lobes
- **Fall Color:** yellow

A colleague once developed a mocking caricature of the hand gesture I perform when describing the emergence of the leaves of this small tree in the spring. They are threadlike and the freshest green imaginable. In Japanese, ‘Koto-no-ito’ means “string of the harp,” and you can almost hear the soft music playing as the delicate threads move in the breeze. The lobes thicken as they mature, resulting in a lush, bamboo–like texture. This small tree grows relatively slowly and is equally attractive when viewed from up close or far away. A large specimen can be seen growing near the entry courtyard of the Seattle Japanese Garden, standing on its own like a sculpture. ‘Koto-no-ito’ also works equally well planted in groups or as container subjects. The fall color is butter yellow. Because of its manageable size and growth rate, the tree is unlikely to outgrow almost any situation you place it in. This is my favorite Japanese maple cultivar.
Acer palmatum ‘Seiryu’
Size: 12–15 feet tall
Form: rounded vase
Leaf shape: lace-leaf
Fall color: yellow, orange, red, purple
RHS Award of Garden Merit
Great Plant Picks

Have you ever seen a full-grown, weeping cutleaf Japanese maple—the ones they haul into the garden shows that have been carefully pruned by old men with small hands for 80 years? They embody one of the iconic images of the Japanese maple, but most people have neither the time nor the pruning skills to transform the lump they bought at the nursery into such a beautiful specimen. If you love the delicate texture of the lace-leaf varieties but want something more manageable, check out ‘Seiryu’. The only lace-leaf variety that grows naturally in an upright form, ‘Seiryu’, which means “green dragon” in Japanese, has some great attributes beyond the feathery leaf texture. The rounded-vase shape makes a statement as a single specimen viewed from afar but is also effective planted near a terrace or outside a window. And the fall color is outstanding, with the green summer foliage changing to yellow, orange, crimson and deep purple all on the same tree. In a good fall-color year, a mature ‘Seiryu’ looks like a fluffy, glowing ember.

Right Maple, Right Place
The more I travel or talk with gardeners from other parts of the United States, the more I realize how lucky we Northwest gardeners are to be able to so easily grow what can be viewed by others as a somewhat finicky plant. Because of this, we have the full menu of cultivated varieties at our disposal, meaning there is a Japanese maple to fit just about any garden situation we face. Our only challenge is choosing the right one. If we do that, and apply just a bit of thoughtful care, we have only to sit back and watch them grow in the elegant, colorful, interesting ways they do, season after season and year after year.

Caring for Japanese Maples
All Japanese maples appreciate a bit of added summer water and decently drained soils with some organic matter. Most do perfectly well in full sun (where they color up better), seem the happiest in partial shade, and will grow—if not thrive—in deep shade. All have slow-to-moderate growth rates, and shouldn’t need any fertilizer. They have well-behaved root systems and are therefore useful for tighter situations near paving or structures, or in containers. They transplant reasonably well and take easily to pruning, although most do not need much.

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