Snakebark Maples in the Arboretum

Text by Phil Wood
Photos by Niall Dunne*

We admire the stripes of tigers, zebras and exotic reptiles as marvels of natural pattern. The plant world has its fair share of stunning striation, too, perhaps no more astounding than in the snakebark maples. A group of about 20 *Acer* species primarily from Asia, the snakebark maples (technically known as Section Macrantha) are—generally speaking—upright trees. They feature smooth, patterned, olive-green bark that’s often streaked with white and green, and sometimes purple or red—particularly on young trees and new branches.

The group also goes by the name of stripebark maples, and UW Botanic Gardens Curator of Living Collections Ray Larson jokes that he prefers this term because “snakes might scare people.” But there’s no denying the resemblance of the bark of many of these species to the skin of serpents. (Some species at maturity even produce aboveground support roots that look remarkably like snakes slithering along the ground. See photo on page 13.) In addition to beautiful bark, many species in the group are also prized for their colorful fall foliage.

The striped bark of *Acer davidii*, Father David’s maple.

*Except where noted.
ARISTOCRATS OF THE GENUS

The Washington Park Arboretum has a great collection of snakebark maples: 74 specimens, comprising 14 different species and several cultivated varieties. Many of these can be found in the Daniel J. Hinkley Asian Maple Collection, located between the Magnolia Collection and the Puget Sound Hybrid Rhododendron Garden. This collection is named after well-known local plant expert Dan Hinkley, who, it turns out, collected seeds in the wilds of Japan, Taiwan and China for quite a number of the Arboretum’s snakebarks.

All of the snakebark maples species are native to Asia, with the lone exception of *Acer pensylvanicum*, or moosewood, which hails from eastern North America. (See my article on this species in the Fall 2021 issue of the “Bulletin.”)

Dan remarks that “Over the many years of looking at plants in the wild, and, one by one, adding to my life list of maples observed, it has always been while observing the snakebarks, Section Macrantha, that I felt I was in the company of the aristocrats of the genus. Few other trees possess the ability to illuminate a woodland with glowing autumn tints and a ghostly winter outline.”

FATHER DAVID’S MAPLE

Probably the most well-known Asian snakebark is *Acer davidii*, Father David’s maple.

Native to Central and Western China, this variable species was discovered in 1869 by the French missionary and botanist Armand David. It grows up to 50 feet tall and features shiny-green bark with silvery stripes. The unlobed, oval-shaped leaves appear very un-maple-like. They turn orange to yellow in the fall.

The Arboretum has about 30 specimens, the oldest of which date back to the late 1940s and 1950s. You can see one of the oldest ones (dating to 1947) at the north end of the Witt Winter Garden. More recently planted specimens include three on the northeast edge of the future China Forest at Pacific Connections, where the New Zealand Forest trail switches back toward the Lookout Gazebo. These young trees were collected by Dan Hinkley in China in 2008.

Along with the straight species, the collection also features more than a dozen specimens of *A. davidii ssp. grosseri*. This subspecies has boldly streaked bark and triangular-oval leaves, which may or may not have three shallow side lobes. Two big specimens, dating to 1947, can be found along Arboretum Drive, across from the Sequoia Grove. Several more, of varying ages and sizes, can be found in the Asian Maple Collection. At the northwest edge of the collection, along the lower Lookout Loop Trail, is a young specimen of the cultivar *A. davidii* ‘Serpentine’, which features unusually strong contrast between the white and green bark stripes.
OTHER SNAKEBARK HIGHLIGHTS

The red snakebark maple, *Acer capillipes*, is an elegant small tree from Japan. Usually growing up to about 30 feet high, it is prized for its white-striped green bark and bright-red fall color. The leaves are broadly oval-shaped, each with three pointed lobes. The Arboretum has seven specimens altogether, including four in the Asian Maple Collection. A lovely mature specimen can be found along the west side of the path dividing the collection from the Hybrid Rhododendron Garden. It dates to 1947 and was sourced from the Westonbirt Arboretum in Gloucestershire, England. A younger specimen in the southeast corner of the Asian Maple Collection was wild-collected as seed by Dan in 1997 in the Shizuoka Prefecture of Honshu, Japan.

Another spectacular Hinkley collection from Shizuoka Prefecture can be found at the south end of the Asian Maple Collection, *Acer rufinerve*, the grey-budded snakebark maple. Also native to mountain forests in Japan, this species grows up to 35 feet and features green-and-white-striped branches and more deeply lobed “maple-like” foliage (with three lobes per leaf). Autumn colors include bright red and yellow. Dan also collected seed for this specimen on the 1997 trip, and the tree was planted in the Arboretum in 1999. As the bark of this species matures, the white stripes become more intermittent and are intersected by large, diamond-shaped beige patches, with the whole effect looking like calligraphy.

Another eye-catching species growing next to *A. rufinerve* at the south end of the Asian Maple Collection is the Kawakami maple, *Acer caudatifolium*. This medium-sized tree endemic to Taiwan features beautiful reddish-green bark, marked with faint white stripes and brown-and-white diamond-shaped bud patterns. The leaves look more like the foliage of a birch tree than a maple—narrowly oval, with serrated edges and no lobes. Fall color is yellow to russet. The specimen next to the *A. rufinerve* dates to 1997 and came from the UBC Botanical Garden in Vancouver. A newer one at the north end of the Asian Maple Collection was collected by Dan in 2012, at Hehuanshan, a mountain in central Taiwan.

Another lovely Taiwanese species is *Acer rubescens*. It’s a medium-sized tree, getting up to 60 feet tall, with green-and-silver striped bark, and serrated, five-lobed leaves. It gets its species name from its beautiful bright-red leaf petioles and the fall foliage color, with the deep-green leaves turning red-orange very late in the season. According to Arthur Lee Jacobson’s “North American Landscape Trees” (Ten Speed Press, 1996), the species was “Introduced to the U.S. in 1949, when seeds were received at the Seattle Arboretum.” Currently there are two
specimens, one on the southeast side of the Asian Maple Collection, dating to 1995, which unfortunately has sustained some trunk damage. The other one is not far to the south, along the upper Overlook Trail, and is in fine shape. It dates to 1987 and was a gift to the Arboretum from its influential former director, Brian Mulligan.

**DAN HINKLEY’S PICKS**

Dan says one of his favorite snakebark maples is *Acer tegmentosum* ‘Joe Witt’, a cultivar of the Manchurian snakebark maple with exceptional white striping. The straight species is a small tree native to Manchuria, Korea and Russia, bearing large, round, shallowly lobed leaves, similar those of *A. pensylvanicum*. Dan selected and named the cultivar after another influential Arboretum figure, former curator Joe Witt. He first noticed the tree growing along Arboretum Drive in 1984, while studying at the UW and living in the Stone Cottage. However, it wasn’t until Dan saw the tree in the wilds of Korea in 1993 that he realized how outstanding the Arboretum’s tree was. The original tree, which came as a scion for grafting from the Arnold Arboretum in 1949, is long gone, but you can see one of its “offspring” growing at the south end of the Witt Winter Garden.

Another of Dan’s favorites is *Acer sikkimense*, Sikkim maple, native to the Himalayas. Dark–ruby–red leaves emerge in spring and keep their glossy glint all summer. The bark is greyish–black, and slightly white–striped. The Arboretum has two specimens in its collection, both planted in 2012. Because the species is one of conservation concern, we don’t publish its location. (For more information, contact Ray Larson at 206–616–1118 or halcyon@uw.edu.)

**CULTIVATING & SOURCING SNAKEBARK MAPLES**

Snakebark maples do best in well–drained soil and dappled shade. Hot sun may burn the bark. Like Japanese maples, snakebark maples are susceptible to verticillium wilt, caused by a soil borne fungus that turns leaves brown. The disease is typically fatal, so if one of your maples gets it, do not plant another one in the same spot.

Although snakebarks are remarkable plants, it can be difficult to source them for the home garden. Windcliff Plants, Dan Hinkley’s nursery (https://danieljhinkley.com/windcliff–plants), offers some snakebark maples for sale at their location in Indianola, Washington. Dan says they are currently offering wild–collected *A. davidii* and *A. rubescens*, and that they will have a very good, select form of *A. sikkimense* by late summer 2022. West Seattle Nursery (www.westseattlenursery.com) also occasionally stocks snakebark maples.

Lucile Whitman, owner of Whitman Farms (www.whitmanfarms.com), a wholesale grower in Salem, Oregon, also likes snakebark maples. In
my own garden I have *A. davidii* ‘Scarlet Forest’,
grown by Lucile and purchased from a wholesale
nursery in Redmond 20 years ago. The reddish
bark has light-gray stripes on a 30-foot-tall tree.

Among Lucile’s favorites is *Acer crataegifolium*
‘Veitchii’, Veitch hawthorn maple, a cultivar of
a small snakebark species from Japan. The new
leaves emerge pink with patches of cream, while
the young branches are bright red and dark green
with pale stripes. (There’s one in the Arboretum,
close to the *A. davidii* ‘Serpentine’.)

Of course, if you can’t find a snakebark maple
for your own garden, or go on an exciting plant
expedition to Asia to see one in the wild, you can
always come to the Arboretum and enjoy its sss...
scintillating collection.

**Phil Wood** is a garden designer and writer
and serves on the “Arboretum Bulletin”
Editorial Board. Visit his website at www.
philwoodgardens.com.