

Red Maple

Acer rubrum

Common name:

Red Maple, Swamp Maple, Scarlet Maple, Soft Maple

Pronunciation:

A-ser RU-brum

Family:

Aceraceae

Genus:

Acer

"The Red Maple loves swamps and river floodplains and low woods where spring pools form from the melting snow or the overflowing streams. When Red Maple grows up into the hills and even ascends the Appalachians, it likes deep ravines, the shady side of cliffs and high mountain coves. With its cool, deep, yet not oppressive umbrage, and its elegant leaves, it ranks wherever it is found with the first choice of our finest shade trees."

"If Red Maple were as valuable a timber tree as Hard [Sugar] Maple it would, with its immense range and abundance, be a national resource of the first class, but the wood is only three fourths as strong and yet weighs almost as much.... It is made into box veneer, interior finish, flooring, kitchenware, clothes hangers, and clothes pins. Curly and wavy grains occasionally occur and some bird's-eye grain is also found. Sugar may be drawn from the Red Maple though in smaller quantities than from Sugar Maple. Our pioneer ancestors made ink by adding sulfate of iron to the tannin extracted from Red Maple bark. If, instead, alum was added, a cinnamon-colored dye was produced; the use of both alum and sulfate of iron with the bark extract produced a black dye."

(excerpts from Donald Culross Peattie, *A Natural History of Trees of Eastern and Central North America*)

Quick ID Tips:

- Leaves have three, somewhat triangular lobes and usually have red leaf stalks
- First large tree to have bud break in early spring with deep red flowers
- Bark is smooth gray on young trees; on older trees, the bark becomes dark gray, and rough or scaly, and forms long narrow plates whose edges sometimes peel away from the trunk

Details:

- This widespread and common broadleaf deciduous tree is our first harbinger of spring in New England when its bare branches show a blush of deep red in late March or early April.
- The Red Maple grows to 60-75 ft. tall and develops ascending branches that extend out in all directions from a rounded crown.
- Something red is readily visible in all seasons: red flowers in early spring, new leaf growth is reddish at twig tips, usually red leaf stalks, red leaf color in fall, and large red flower buds visible all winter on twigs.
- Bark is smooth, light gray on young trees and develops into dark gray, rough, bark with long narrow plates with some ridge edges peeling away from trunk.
- Leaves are opposite, simple, 4" long and wide, usually with 3 serrated lobes, but sometimes 5, and have a rounded or slightly indented base. The leaves are relatively small for a maple, medium to dark green above, silvery below and usually pubescent on veins.
- Fall leaf color may vary from green-yellow, yellow, to brilliant red, one of the first trees to color.
- Early emerging flowers appear before the leaves and are dark red (source of "red maple" name) with small petals and sepals.
- Fruit is a samara with wings 1" long and about a 60° spread between them. Seed production is prolific, with a 12" DBH tree producing nearly a million seeds.
- Red maple is a highly desirable wildlife browse food. Elk and white-tailed deer especially use the current season's growth of Red Maple and Aspen as an important source of winter food. Timber harvesting slash can also provide an important source of browse to help sustain the animals. Red Maple, Sugar Maple, and Paper Birch trees cut any time after leaf fall provide browse as nutritious as, and more acceptable than, trees cut immediately before leaf fall.
- This tree prefers full sun although is shade tolerant in most places, and the Red Maple is very tolerant of a wide range of soil, more than any other North American forest species. Very common in acid and moist soils and is typically found in low, wet areas like swamps, bogs, and pond margins. However, it also thrives in upland woods as well.
- Hardy in USDA Zones 3-9. The Red Maple has a large native range, from Newfoundland to Florida west to Minnesota, Oklahoma, Texas. Part of its range overlaps with that of *Acer saccharinum*, the Silver Maple, with which it hybridizes and produces intermediate maples.



plant habit, spring



flowers



fruit development and expanding leaves



leaves



branches, fall



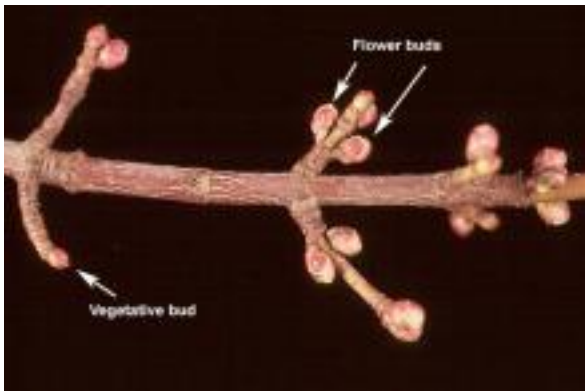
leaves, fall



trunk, bark



branches, winter



winter buds

Sources:

- Oregon State University Landscape Plants,
<https://landscapeplants.oregonstate.edu/plants/acer-rubrum>
- U.S. Forest Service,
https://www.srs.fs.usda.gov/pubs/misc/ag_654/volume_2/acer/rubrum.htm
- Charles Fergus, *Trees of New England, A Natural History* (Globe Pequot Press 2005)
- David Sibley, *The Sibley Guide to Trees* (Knopf 2009)