

THE GENUS ACER

Within the family of Sapindaceae, there are over a hundred unique genera, however, one genus you are likely familiar with is *Acer* aka the Maples. *Acer* derives its name from the Proto Indo-European root “ak” meaning to be sharp or sharpen. Within the genus *Acer*, we find over 125 species worldwide, most of which are native to Asia. However, you will notice clutches of maples native to northern Africa, Europe, and of course, North America. In fact, this genus holds such cultural significance that our northern neighbors in Canada decided to spotlight their coat of arms with a maple leaf! For our sports fans around town, the Toronto Maple Leafs are another prime example.

Two prominent traits for identification across this genus are its palmate foliage and its unique fruit, the samara, or as it is commonly known among children “whirlybirds” or “helicopters”. Come autumn in our area, these trees will light up the landscape with shades of golden yellow, fiery orange and bright reds that we all love to seek out driving along the roadside.

With proper cultural practice and successional maintenance (mulching, pruning, etc.), *Acer* sp. will remain healthy with relatively little disease or pest issues. While they won't play host to very many pests and diseases, they do host a vast array of beneficial larvae and birds. Our native species *Acer rubrum* (Red Maple) and *Acer saccharum* (Sugar Maple) are host to over 280 species of caterpillars. Maples are preferred by many birds for both nesting and insect foraging. Rose-Breasted Grosbeak and Northern Cardinals enjoy feasting on the samaras as they ripen in late summer.



Acer saccharum 'Bonfire'



Acer rubrum

In addition to *A. rubrum* and *A. saccharum*, *A. pensylvanicum* (Snakebark Maple) is a beautiful species native to our region known for its distinctly striped bark. There are also several commonly found non-native but well-behaved species in our landscape, such as *A. palmatum* (Japanese Maple), and *A. griseum* (Paperbark Maple).

While the majority of maple flowers are considered insignificant, they come in an array of colors early in spring, greens, yellows, reds, purples and white just to name a few, often containing five petals, five sepals, eight stamens and a bicarpellate ovary from which the samara is produced. Individual flowers on some species bloom before foliage emerges, and some slightly after the foliage emerges, but generally there are no more than five weeks between these two events. Once flowers are pollinated, samaras tend to form during the summer and drop shortly thereafter.



Acer palmatum

A typical maple leaf is palmately lobed, with the number of lobes between zero to thirteen. Should we take this news to Vegas, it could be a safe bet to say that three and five lobed species are most common. In our area, the foliage is deciduous, and with consideration to cultivars, can be colored green and a few taxa even a chartreuse or burgundy coloration. Come October, the anthocyanins assist in producing reds and burgundies, while carotenoids deliver yellows and golds!



Acer griseum

Outside of their fantastic fall color, maples fill many other niches in the landscape. Do you already have a ton of shade? Try *A. palmatum* or *A. pensylvanicum*. Some ground that's a little soggy? *A. rubrum* is here to help. How about the sprucing up the grays of winter? The bark of *A. griseum*, *A. buergerianum*, and *A. triflorum*. Need to block your neighbor's hideous landscape? *A. circinatum* makes a fantastic large hedge. Many species do great on well-draining sites as well. The mounds in UDBG's Worrielow garden play host to *A. miyabei* and *A. campestre*, as well as many of the species listed above! Give these plants a chance to transform your landscape and they will do just that and pay dividends for years to come.

