

Prune Like a Pro: Japanese Maples 2022



TITLE: Japanese Maple (*Acer palmatum*)

Description: Japanese Maple is one of the most favorite trees in the home landscape. There are over 300 cultivars - some with green leaves and others with red. Some are upright airy trees (e.g., Bloodgood and Burgundy Lace), while others are shorter with more finely dissected leaves (e.g., Crimson Queen and Laceleaf Maples). All perform better here when they are sheltered from wind and get afternoon shade in the heat of summer.

Objective(s): Learn how to prune a Japanese Maple to maintain a natural looking shape and an airy canopy. In this video, we are pruning a "*Crimson Queen*".

WHAT: Pruning Japanese Maples artistically is actually pretty easy. Annual pruning can be done with hand pruners, as they grow very slowly. Because they are slow growers, their pruning budget is quite small (~15%). Loppers or a saw are needed only after major storm damage or long-term neglect.

Know how your Japanese Maple should look. There are two main types: 1) upright varieties that have branches that point upward, resembling open fans, and 2)weeping, lace leaf varieties that have branches that grow to the sides, and downward, with a veil canopy.

WHY: The goal is to have distinguishable leaf layers, like layers of fans, which is the natural shape of a *Crimson Queen* Japanese Maple. The other goal is to keep the canopy "airy," as airflow into and through the canopy are part of keeping the tree healthy.

WHEN: February is the perfect month to prune a Japanese Maple. With the leaves out of the way, it is easy to see the branch structure and, in turn, make the right cuts. In early summer, you may need to do a little touch-up thinning to distinguish the leaf layers and keep the tree airy.

WHERE: Japanese Maples are shallow rooted, so they like moist soil that drains well. They prefer slightly acidic soil but will thrive in slightly alkaline soil. Japanese Maples perform better when they are sheltered from wind and get afternoon shade in the heat of summer. In east TN, winter winds can desiccate a Japanese Maple, and summer sun can bake them -- so plant them in a protected spot.

HOW: The trick to making Japanese maples look great is to separate the branches into overlapping layers that do not touch each other. You want to be able to see between the leaf layers. If lateral branches grow downward, crossing into the layer below, they should be removed or cut back to a side branch facing up and out. The same applies to lateral branches that grow upward into the above layer. This pruning strategy is how the tree becomes layered, like a series of fans.

You can follow up with some fine-tuned pruning shortly after the trees are in full canopy.

IMPORTANT POINTS:

- Know what variety of Japanese Maple you have, and what it should look like.
- Start from the bottom up and the inside out and remove the 4 D's
- Gently shape the remainder of the tree.
 - Twiggy growth on the main trunk and main branches can be removed to show off the branch structure,
 - Leave the twiggy growth on the tips or gently thin it if it is too plentiful.
 - Avoid pruning a large branch back to a small side branch or you will get an unbalanced look.
 - Periodically step back and examine your work from different angles.
 - Look at your tree from the base up, following a branch upward to assess what and where to prune next.
- Do not rush, and if in doubt, do not cut.
 - You can always cut it next year, as Japanese Maples are slow growing trees.



Additional Resources / References:

“Pruning Japanese Maples” , Michelle Le Strange, UC Master Gardener,
<https://ucanr.edu/datastoreFiles/268-561.pdf>

“February is Japanese Maple Pruning Time”, Connie Espinoza, UC Master Gardener,
<https://ucanr.edu/datastoreFiles/268-751.pdf>

“Focus on Form and Foliage With Japanese Maples” , NC State Extension,
<https://extensiongardener.ces.ncsu.edu/extgardener-focus-on-form-and-foliage-with-japanese-maples/>

“Caring for Freeze Damaged Japanese Maples” , University of Missouri,
<https://ipm.missouri.edu/MEG/2008/3/Caring-for-Freeze-Damaged-Japanese-Maples/>

Knox County Master Gardeners website: www.knoxcountymastergardener.org

Knox County Master Gardeners Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/KnoxCountyMG>

Ask-a-Master Gardener / Knox County Extension Helpline: (865) 215-2340

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