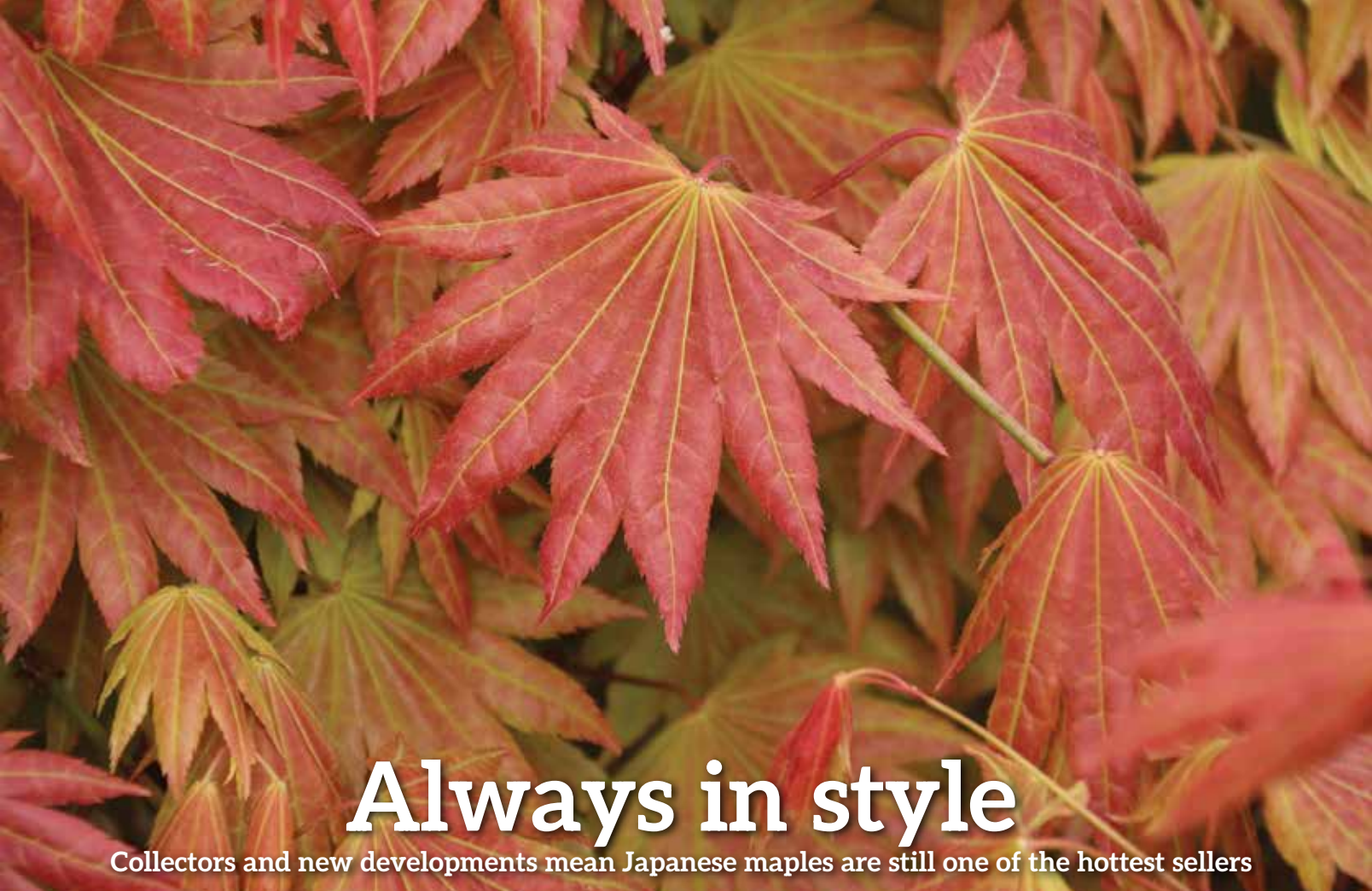




Always in style

Collectors and new developments mean Japanese maples are still one of the hottest sellers

Moonrise® Full Moon Maple (*Acer shirasawanum* 'Munn 001'). PHOTO COURTESY OF J. FRANK SCHMIDT & SON CO.

BY ERICA BROWNE GRIVAS

Japanese maples are having a moment — again. Compact size, four-season interest and a collector following rivaling hostas have made them one of the hottest sellers in the trade.

One of the most iconic trees in the landscape, Japanese maples have been cultivated for centuries, known in garden design since at least the Heian period of Japan (794-1185).

Breeding accelerated during the Edo period (1603-1868), the first specimens reached England in 1820, most likely in the form of the straight species, *Acer palmatum*.

“In many ways they are the perfect small garden tree, relatively trouble-free and disease resistant,” said Guy Meacham, new plant development manager for **J. Frank Schmidt & Son Co.** in Boring, Oregon. “They come in all shapes and sizes — upright, weeping, dwarf, tall — and they are well suited to container production, both in the nursery and the garden or landscape.”

“There are so many options, from tried-and-true classics to an ever-expanding list of new cultivars to choose from,” agreed Roby Babcock, marketing director at **Iseli Nursery** in Boring, Oregon. “They fit into any number of landscapes with ease and lend themselves well to our increasingly small yards.”

And they just get better with age.

“I think that the older they get, it gives it more of a character and people really like kind of the architecture of the branching,” said Wayne Staehely, founder of **Columbia Nursery LLC** in Canby, Oregon.



Ed Wood Full Moon Maple (*Acer japonicum* 'Ed Wood #2'). PHOTO COURTESY OF J. FRANK SCHMIDT & SON CO.



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Top: Arctic Jade® Maple (*Acer × pseudosieboldianum* 'IsIAJ'). PHOTO COURTESY OF ISELI NURSERY

Bottom: Crimson Queen Japanese Maple (*Acer palmatum dissectum* 'Crimson Queen'). PHOTO COURTESY OF J. FRANK SCHMIDT & SON CO.



Acer palmatum 'Mikawa yatsubusa'. PHOTO COURTESY OF ISELI NURSERY

Oregon is the number one state for growing Japanese maples, selling \$61.1 million worth in 2024, good for 70.9% of the U.S. market, according to the newly released USDA Census of Horticultural Specialties.

The family of Japanese maples

The umbrella term “Japanese maples” encompasses several closely related species. The group is made up of three core Asian species, native to Japan, China, Korea and Mongolia.

Acer palmatum — The name references its palmate, hand-like leaf shape. Height ranges from 10–25 feet tall and wide, with a spectrum of fall color from yellow to bronze.

A. japonicum — Its somewhat airy rounded leaves earned it the nicknames full moon or downy maple. It reaches 20–30 feet tall and turns gold and red in autumn.

A. shirasawanum — It was formerly classified under *A. japonicum*, and is confusingly also called full moon maple or Shirisawa maple. Reaching 15–20 feet high, its leaves are smaller and the shoots are hairless. Older trees boast silver-white bark. The golden-leaved cultivar ‘Aureum’ is the most well-known and earned the Royal Horticultural Society Award of Garden Merit.

In addition, several closely related maples offer similar characteristics and are being hybridized with the core species, such as *Acer sieboldianum* (Siebold’s maple), *Acer pseudosieboldianum* (Korean maple), and Pacific Northwest native *Acer*

circinatum (vine maple).

Classics that don’t quit

While Meacham said, “Japanese maples have always been a somewhat cyclical crop with peaks and valley in demand,” there are some varieties with strong staying power in the overall market.

At J. Frank Schmidt, Meacham highlighted *A. palmatum* var. *atropurpureum* ‘Bloodgood’, *A. palmatum* ‘Tamukeyama’, ‘Emperor 1’, ‘Crimson Queen’, ‘Twombly’s Red Sentinel’, (a columnar red) ‘Viridis’, (a cascading green dwarf), and ‘Northern Glow’ as some of the top sellers across the country.

For Iseli, Babcock highlighted both workhorses and specialty selections: *Acer palmatum* ‘Shishigashira’, *A. palmatum* ‘Mikawa yatsubusa’, *A. shirasawanum* ‘Aureum’, *A. palmatum* ‘Osakazuki okame’, and *A. palmatum* ‘Sharp’s Pygmy.’

For seasonal color, Babcock recommended *Acer* × *pseudosieboldianum* First Flame® and *Acer palmatum* ‘Tsumagaki’ for spring color, *Acer palmatum* ‘Bloodgood’ and *Acer palmatum dissectum* ‘Crimson Queen’ for summer color, and *Acer palmatum* ‘Tobiosho’ or *Acer* × *pseudosieboldianum* Final Fire® for fall color.

Beyond foliage, he noted Japanese maples can provide structural interest in the garden even in winter, such as many of the cascading varieties as well as *Acer* × *pseudosieboldianum* ‘Origami.’

Regional challenges

Japanese maples are so popular



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that customers want to grow them outside their hardiness zones.

“The customers desire the delicate textures, varied colors and different shapes that Japanese maples can bring to their yards, but they must plant them in locations that are strategically considered for protection from heat, cold and wind,” said Pete Brentano, owner of **Brentano's Tree Farm** in St. Paul, Oregon. “With these conditions in mind, our customers generally stick with the names that have been around for a long time, as they have proven over the years that they can live in these locations. As such, we find that cultivars like ‘Bloodgood’ are essential to our market.”

The collector effect

In addition to the classics, there are increasing numbers of collectors who want the newest varieties. Like potato chips, it's hard to grow just one Japanese maple, as specialty societies and websites attest.



Acer palmatum 'Sharp's Pygmy'. PHOTO COURTESY OF ISELI NURSERY

Demand for new and unusual cultivars spikes popularity and drives sales.

“There are Japanese maple collectors and groups that continue to share their enthusiasm and knowledge which also helps to keep these maples in fashion,” Staehely said.

For growers, this might mean stocking

both proven classics for mainstream customers and limited-run specialty cultivars for the enthusiast market — a strategy that maximizes sales across customer types.

Right now, he said, collectors are snapping up varieties with tight nodes, like *A. palmatum* ‘Mikawa Yatsubusa’,



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Acer x pseudosieboldianum 'Wabi sabi'. PHOTO COURTESY OF ISELI NURSERY

a highly popular dwarf with an irregular habit and chartreuse leaves turning vivid red. Such branching lends a mature bonsai-like appearance more quickly.

Many of these are not readily available, but he is watching autumnal toned 'Sonya Yatsubusa' and variegated *A. palmatum* 'Lily Pad.' Another to look for is 'Caperci's Dwarf', which tops out at 1-2 feet tall, spreading 5-6 feet wide in 10 years, with lime leaves edged in red.

New cultivars to watch for

The next generation of Japanese maples is being engineered for extremes. As hardiness zones shift and weather becomes less predictable, breeders are crossing *palmatum* cultivars with hardier species that can handle deeper cold and hotter summers.

A. pseudosieboldianum increases hardiness and has been central to many new hybrids.

"Our hybrid collections have been keeping us busy fulfilling demand," said Babcock. North Wind® Maple (*Acer x pseudosieboldianum* 'IslNW'), Arctic Jade® Maple (*Acer x pseudosieboldianum* 'IslAJ'), and Alpenglowl® Maple (*Acer x pseudosieboldianum* 'INAG-E61' PP35,081) are a few that Iseli sees steady demand for.

These maples are part of the "Jack Frost" series, boasting stellar fall color and distinctive foliage, and are hardy to Zone 4.

"The temperature tolerance that our hybrid maples demonstrate has also expanded the customer base that can enjoy them," added Babcock.

J. Frank Schmidt created *Acer pseudosieboldianum x palmatum* 'Hasselkus'

Northern Glow Maple® hardy to Zone 4, with deeply cut foliage that emerges coppery bronze, shifts green for summer, and morphs to a blend of vintage shades for fall.

Meacham called out 'Morton UW' / 'Morning Starburst'®, a Morton Arboretum hybrid between *A. circinatum x A. pseudosieboldianum* as "exciting," delivering Zone 5-9 hardiness.

J. Frank Schmidt isn't stopping there. "We are working on hybrids of *A. circinatum x palmatum* and *A. pseudosieboldianum x palmatum* for future introduction," Meacham said, signaling the next wave of climate-tough maples is already in the pipeline.

Maples for compact gardens are in high demand, too. Babcock said, "There has been a trend of developing smaller plants that will do well in containers and small garden spaces and that trend is continuing."

He is excited about *A. palmatum* 'Sir Damon,' a rare cultivar of the coral bark maple with brighter stems that hold color longer than most and foliage edged in pink, and *Acer x pseudosieboldianum* 'Wabi Sabi', a dwarf green dissected weeping introduction featuring contrasting stems, petioles and seedheads.

Cultivation and production tips

Japanese maples demand patience. Most cultivars are grafted, grow slowly, and require intensive monitoring, especially in the first few years.

While some growers root cuttings for bonsai or for slower-growing cultivars, Staehely said, most Japanese maple cultivars, are grown via grafting.

As a group they tend to be slow-to-mature, adding from one to two feet a



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year on average. While you can grow them faster, said Staehely, you'd lose that architectural quality customers are looking for. "You could grow a Japanese maple incredibly fast, like to six feet if you wanted to," he said. "But that's just a single whip and there's no character. There's no branching."

"Some people will overfertilize the plant because they want it to grow faster, but a heavier branched tree is the better option, especially for a customer," Staehely said.

Babcock agreed, saying, "You want to look for a Japanese maple that has a good structure and at Iseli we spend the time to make sure that our maples are pruned correctly to provide a good foundation for future growth."

Solid branching structure is critical for regions getting regular ice and snowstorms.

Maples take a lot of attention, Staehely said, particularly until they reach the three-gallon size. "A lot of is hand watered," he said. "A lot of is monitored

multiple times a day. There's a lot of after-care that goes into it."

"One of the biggest challenges is a crop can take three to eight years to produce — depending on the size you are selling — is matching production with demand," Meacham said.

Iseli is working to keep up with demand. "We are expanding our production numbers and our need for space to grow them has increased as well," Babcock said. "It is important for us to maintain the top quality we are known for even as we expand our operation to meet market demand."

What customers need to know

Armed with better information, customers make better choices — and have fewer returns. Here's what growers wish more buyers understood.

"Japanese maples are more climate adaptable than they are often given credit

for," Meacham said. "They are not bullet-proof, but they can take hot summers with little-to-no supplemental irrigation once established. The introduction of newer hybrid cultivars with *A. pseudosieboldianum* and *A. circinatum* should help mitigate some of the changes in climate."

Japanese maples can also thrive in containers with consistent watering and periodic root pruning or transplanting, Staehely said.

Customers can tend to over prune Japanese maples, Meacham said.

However, just like any grafted plant, do watch for understock reversions and prune any green growth below the graft union. ©

*Erica Browne Grivas is an award-winning journalist and gardener pushing zone boundaries in Seattle, Washington. She can be reached at EricaGrivas.com and *A Gardener's Path* on Substack.*



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