



## Pruning Japanese Maples

by Michelle Le Strange, UC Master Gardener

One of the most favorite trees in the home landscape is the lovely Japanese Maple (*Acer palmatum*). We choose and plant this tree because we've seen its delicate form, graceful elegance, and the character of its branches enhancing many established landscapes.

**Japanese Maple Forms:** There are over 300 cultivars of Japanese maples; some with green leaves and others with red. Some are upright airy trees (like Oshio Beni, Bloodgood and Burgundy Lace) that are best suited to be in the understory of a forest. Others are shorter with more finely dissected leaves (like Butterfly, Crimson Queen, and the Laceleaf Maples) that take center stage in a flower bed. All perform better here when they are sheltered from wind and get afternoon shade in the heat of summer.

**Pruning Skills:** When it comes to pruning, many of us feel we lack the skill to prune maples, but pruning Japanese maples artistically is actually pretty easy. The goal is to strive for a natural shape and airy canopy.

**The Right Tools for the Job:** While Japanese maples can reach a mature height of 20 feet, their growth is relatively slow and their branch diameter is relatively small. Most pruning can be done with a pair of  $\frac{3}{4}$  -1-inch pruners, medium loppers, and a small handsaw for even the biggest of branches. Use sharp pruning tools. A clean pruning wound heals more quickly than a jagged, torn wound created by blunt tools. Secondly, you are less likely to become frustrated, if you can make a perfect cut the first time.

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

### HOW TO PRUNE

**Start by examining and evaluating your tree from the bottom up and the inside out.** Look at the bottom of the trunk and work your way up one branch at a time following it to its end. Japanese maples often are multi trunked. Usually the skirt of the tree needs to be raised so that you can see the trunk(s). If you have a fairly new tree you may notice that some of the main branches are lanky and falling down. Some trees have instant character, while others take time



Start training and shaping your Japanese maples when the trees are small.

to develop theirs. There is a general rule to not remove more than 30% of a tree per year, so it may take more than one season to develop your perfect tree.

**Remove the obvious:** Completely remove dead branches; branches that are too vertical or too horizontal; branches that criss-cross, overlap, are growing inward, or are too deformed; if two branches run parallel, remove one. You'll often find deadwood at the bottom and inside of a tree, where branches have been shaded out. When removing a larger limb, the cut should be made just above the branch collar, which is the ridge or line where the branch joins an older branch or stem. Stand back and re-evaluate the tree from all angles. Don't prune your tree into a narrow hat rack with short branches.



You should be able to see the main branches through the leaf canopy.

**Gently shape the remainder of the tree.** Much of the twiggy growth on the main trunk and on the branches near the main trunk can be removed to expose and show off the branch structure, but 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'll get an unbalanced appearance. 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. Don't rush, and if in doubt, don't cut.



Oftentimes the lower branches need to be lifted up, but this tree blends well with the slope.

A little more thinning of the upper branches would allow us to see through the layers of the tree. Looks like a crossing branch at the base of tree needs to be removed or corrected.



**Direct growth by controlling buds.** Note that buds are arranged opposite each other on the stems and that they face the direction they will grow. When you cut back to the buds, two branches will form. You can direct the growth by choosing one bud and rubbing out the other.

**The trick to making Japanese maples look great** is to separate the branches into overlapping layers that don't touch each other. You want to be able to see between the leaf layers. If lateral branches grow downward, crossing into the layer below, it 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 is how the tree becomes layered, like a series of fans. This last step is often fine-tuned in late spring or early summer when the trees are in full canopy.

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