



Meet the Redbud Tree

by Cathy Ronk, UC Master Gardener

Name:

The Redbud tree is prized for much more than its small size might indicate. Adaptable and dependable, it provides year round interest--but is especially attractive in springtime. "Few trees herald spring as exuberantly as a redbud tree. With its profusion of brilliant, magenta flowers, a redbud tree is a welcome sight after winter for many people." (Julie Christiansen)

Redbud trees belong to the large genus *Cercis*, with five main species: *C. canadensis* (EASTERN REDBUD), *C. chinensis* (CHINESE REDBUD), *C. occidentalis* (WESTERN REDBUD), *C. reniformis* (sometimes listed as OKLAHOMA REDBUD), and *C. siliquastrum* (JUDAS TREE).

Interesting Facts:

- The genus name *Cercis* comes from the Greek word *kerkis* meaning weaver's shuttle, in reference to the shape of Redbud's flattened seed pods.
- Hummingbirds, goldfinches, butterflies, and bees are attracted to the Redbud flowers.
- New stems, cut in winter, are used to add color to Native American baskets.
- Redbud made it on the Arbor Day Society's short list of candidate trees to be considered as our national tree. (However, oak tree won the title!)
- History recounts that the Redbud tree is called "the Judas Tree," because it is related to the type of tree on which Judas Iscariot hanged himself. Supposedly, it became a softwood tree with gentle branches to prevent a repeat of the same tragedy.

Description:

Redbud is usually grown as a multi-trunk tree and has a rounded crown. It provides yellow fall color with the first frost, and is deciduous, so it drops all of its heart-shaped leaves in one season.

In early spring, *before* leaves emerge, an abundance of petite, sweet pea-shaped, magenta to rosy pink flowers bloom on bare twigs, branches, and sometimes the main trunk. These flowers generally last for two to three weeks. Clusters of flat, beanlike pods follow the blossoms and persist into winter. If the sight or sound of these natural wind chimes is bothersome, they can easily be removed with a few gentle swats from a badminton racket.

Eastern Redbud (*C. canadensis*) is native to eastern United States. It is the largest redbud (25-35 feet tall and wide), has the fastest growth rate, and is most apt to take a single trunk tree form. The rich green, 3-6 inch long leaves have pointed tips. Varieties include: '**Ace of Hearts**' with compact habit to 15 feet tall; '**Alba**' with white flowers; '**Appalachian Red**' with deep pink, almost red flowers; '**Forest Pansy**' with purple leaves that requires afternoon shade in hot climates; '**Hearts of Gold**' with leaves that emerge red, maturing to gold and finally green; '**Little Woody**' with a vase shape and compact growth; '**Lavender Twist**' ('**Covey**') with an umbrella of cascading branches; and '**Silver Cloud**' with leaves marbled white.

Notable Eastern Redbud subspecies are *C. canadensis mexicana* from many areas of Mexico with single trunk to 15 feet tall and small, leathery, wavy-edged leaves, and *C. Canadensis texensis 'Oklahoma'* from Texas and Oklahoma with small, glossy, thick, wavy-edged leaves, reaching 15-20 feet high. These two subspecies are more heat and drought tolerant than their Eastern cousin.

Western Redbud (*C. occidentalis*) is native to California, Arizona, Utah, but predominantly grows in California foothills below 4,000 feet. This multi-trunked tree or shrub (10-18 feet tall and wide) is more densely twiggy than its eastern relative. The rounded leaves have heart-shaped bases with notched tips that emerge apple green--thin and delicate, then aging to a leathery texture with bluish green color. The magenta blossoms line the bare, silvery gray branches and are soon accompanied by young leaves. The best floral display comes from plants grown in full sun and with some winter chill. The 1½ to 3½ inch long, flattened seedpods change color from lime green to eggplant purple before drying to a dark brown or charcoal gray. Western Redbud is resistant to oak root fungus and is very drought tolerant. Like most California native plants, it prefers good drainage. '**'Alba'**' is a 3- 6 foot tall shrub with white blooms.

Care:

Plant trees in fall through spring in full sun or light shade. Redbud is tolerant of most soil types and various climates, including the extreme cold and heat of high desert gardens. Flowering is more intense with winter chill. No fertilizer is needed. Redbud is ordinarily pest free. Although Western Redbud is resistant to oak root fungus, avoid overwatering it, especially in heavy soils.

The Water Use Classification of Landscape Species (WUCOLS IV) rates Eastern Redbud as a "moderate water use" tree, and rates Western Redbud as a "very low water use" native tree. The WUCOLS project was initiated and funded by the Water Use Efficiency Office of the California Department of Water Resources (DWR). Work was directed by the University of California Cooperative Extension. WUCOLS IV provides evaluations of the irrigation needs of over 3,500 plant groups used in California landscapes at www.ucanr.edu/sites/WUCOLS.

Pruning should be done in winter or directly after bloom. For a tree shape, limit redbud to three upright trunks (for multi-trunk) or one trunk. To keep the Western Redbud in robust condition, annually thin out the oldest trunks. Or, an unpruned tree can be rejuvenated by cutting the entire clump to the ground. (Several California tribes use this technique to encourage the growth of straight new stems, which are desired for basketry.)

Design Tips:

The handsome Redbud looks great in groupings, shrub borders, or as a featured focal point. In winter, the leafless branches form an interesting silhouette against a wall. Avoid the color of companion plants clashing with the vibrant magenta-colored bloom of the Redbud.

Plant the native Western Redbud with other natives such as California lilac, flannel bush, California buckeye, native iris, coral bells, saffron and sulfur buckwheat.

