

***Acer* spp.**

AYE-ser

Acer - L., maples, sharp

Sapindaceae

Trees are your best antiques.

—Alexander Smith

The 114 species of maples are found almost entirely in the north temperates, with a great many species in China, one in northern Africa, and a number in high-elevation areas of the Asian tropics. They range greatly in size from dwarf shrubs to tall trees, and like the oaks, some are evergreen and others are deciduous. Maples are easily recognized by their fruits: a pair of winged segments, each containing a seed. These wind-dispersed fruits (called “samaras” or “keys”) are perfectly weighted to spin helicopter-like through the air when dislodged or detached from the tree. Pick a fruit off the next maple you see and throw it skyward and you will be surprised by how well it flies. It helps to shout, “Be free!” as you throw it. Maple leaves are opposite on the stem and are usually palmately lobed. Their flowers are relatively inconspicuous, generally wind-pollinated, and emerge as hanging, greenish yellow clusters as new spring leaves unfold.

Maples are celebrated throughout the northeastern U.S. and Canada for their brilliant fall color. One of the species found there, the sugar maple (*Acer saccharum*) is the source of the light-colored, hardwood timber used commonly in furniture, flooring (particularly gymnasiums), and instrument making. The sap of this species is concentrated to form the delicious maple syrup that is capable of elevating morning pancakes from mediocrity to the sublime. In California, which is home to five native species, most maples are grown as ornamentals on streets, in parks, and in gardens in the cooler, wetter, northwestern part of the state. In general, maples don’t grow well in the dry heat of Southern California.



Japanese Maple
(*A. palmatum*) leaves
and flowers



Norway Maple
(*A. platanoides*)
fruit



Hedge Maple
(*A. campestre*)
leaves and fruit



Japanese Maple
(*A. palmatum*)
fall foliage

Silver Maple
(*A. saccharinum*)
trunk





North Temperates, Tropical Asia
Simple or Compound, Opposite
Deciduous and Evergreen, 20–90 ft.

The three species most commonly grown throughout the entire state are Japanese maple (*A. palmatum*), silver maple (*A. saccharinum*), and red maple (*A. rubrum*). Japanese maples, which rarely top out over 20 feet, are delicate garden trees, with dozens of cultivars. Silver maples are common even in Southern California and have gray bark that peels in long strips and bright, golden fall color. The showy red maple has brilliant, crimson fall color, especially in frostier parts of California.

Key to California's Commonly Cultivated Maples

1. Leaves compound (with three or more leaflets)—Box Elder (*A. negundo*) **4**
- 1' Leaves simple
 2. Leaf undersides hairy, white, grayish white, or bluish gray
 3. Most leaves 1 to 3 in. wide
 4. Leaves usually not lobed, sometimes 3-lobed in young shoots—Smooth Leaf Maple (*A. oblongum*) **12**
 - 4' Leaves always 3-lobed
 5. Leaf lateral lobes nearly same size as middle lobe—Trident Maple (*A. buergerianum*) **11**
 - 5' Leaf lateral lobes usually smaller than middle lobe, leaves occasionally unlobed—Evergreen Maple (*A. paxii*) **3**
 - 3' Most leaves >3 in. wide
 6. Middle lobe of most leaves wider near the middle than at the base, leaf underside bright white—Silver Maple (*A. saccharinum*) **5**
 - 6' Middle lobe of most leaves widest at the base, leaf underside light gray, grayish white, or bluish gray
 7. Lobe margins smooth or wavy, or with rounded teeth—Sugar Maple (*A. saccharum*) **7**
 - 7' Lobe margins irregularly or sharply toothed
 8. Leaves 2 to 4 in. wide, lobes sharply toothed, pointed at tip—Red Maple (*A. rubrum*) **8**
 - 8' Leaves 3 to 7 in. wide, lobes with round teeth, rounded at tip—Sycamore Maple (*A. pseudoplatanus*) **6**
 - 2' Leaf undersides hairless, green (although usually paler than the upper side), not white
 9. Leaves with 5 to 11 lobes, tree often small and multistemmed—Japanese Maple (*A. palmatum*) **9**
 - 9' Leaves with 3 to 7 lobes, tree larger, often single stemmed
 10. Most leaves <3 in. wide—Hedge Maple (*A. campestre*) **10**
 - 10' Most leaves >3 in. wide
 11. Most leaves 6 to 12 in. wide, lobes cut deeper than the middle of the leaf—Big Leaf Maple (*A. macrophyllum*) **1**
 - 11' Most leaves 3.5 to 8 in. wide, lobes not deeper than the middle of the leaf
 12. Sap in petiole white; tips of leaf points reduced to a fine hair—Norway Maple (*A. platanoides*) **2**
 - 12' Sap in petiole clear; tips of leaf points not reduced to a hair—Sugar Maple (*A. saccharum*) **7**

