

Paperbark Maple

Jeri Chase, ODF Agency Affairs Specialist

Are you looking for an outstanding small-to medium-sized ornamental tree, with unsurpassed year-round interest? Consider the paperbark maple (*Acer griseum*).

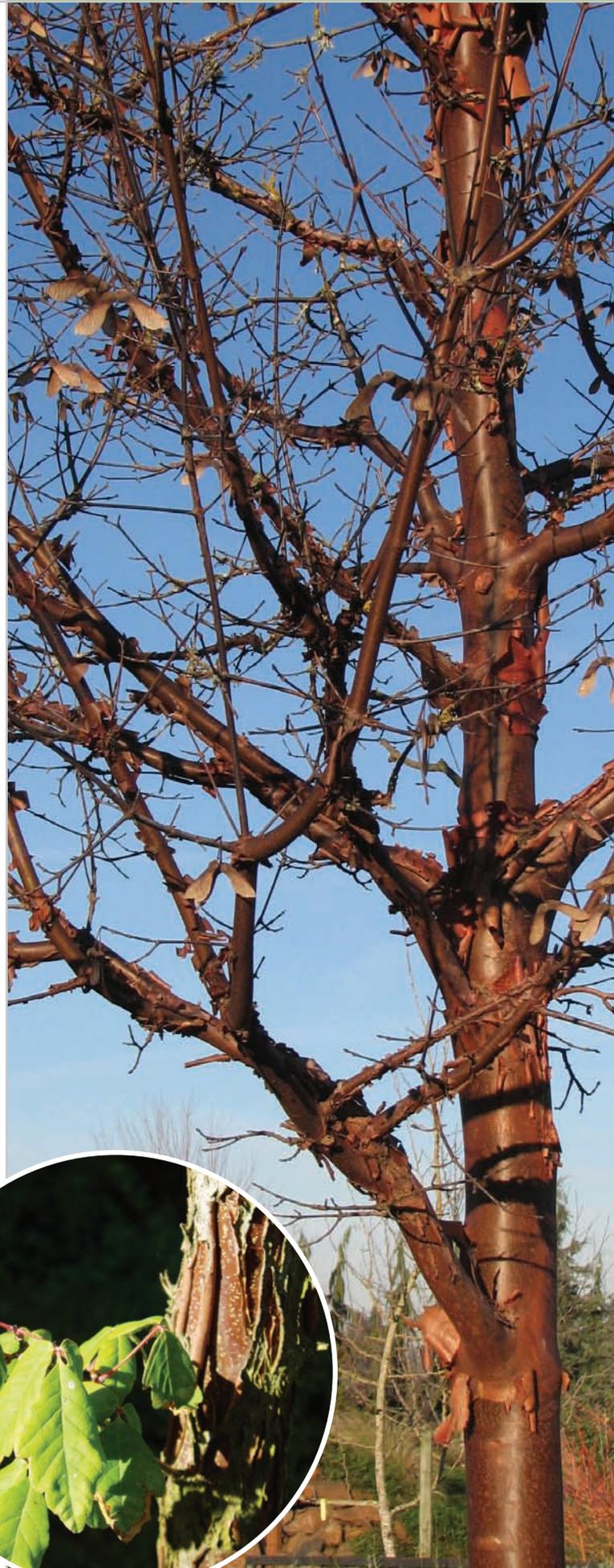
Suitable for small spaces, and relatively easy to grow and care for

The paperbark maple is a slow-growing and long-living deciduous tree that will attain a height of 20-30 feet with a spread of 15-25 feet. It is hardy in many regions of the Pacific Northwest (zones 4-8). A purely ornamental tree, it is suitable for small gardens, near patios and decks, and in median strips and parking lots.

The paperbark maple is stately, growing upright without any drooping, and has an oval, irregular, relatively open crown – although it may become “twiggy” on the inside. This open crown provides filtered, not dense, shade – making it suitable for plantings underneath.

In the early spring, dark purplish-green leaf buds unfurl to three-lobed leaves that are three to six inches, with blunt-toothed margins. Later spring and summer leaves are dark bright green to bluish-green on top with frosty silver undersides. Also in the spring, the paperbark maple flowers – although these flowers are often insignificant, hanging in non-showy inch-long clusters of pale yellow-green. Flowers give way to attractive one- to three-inch reddish-brown winged fruits in the fall that may persist on the tree into winter, and that spread widely when dispersing – resulting in little litter beneath.

Photo from ODF archives





Sunlight reflects off this paperbark maple at the Oregon Garden in Silverton, a great place to learn more about Oregon's trees. Even during the cold months of winter, paperbark maple's cinnamon-brown exfoliating bark is visually interesting and extremely picturesque.

Photo by Cynthia Orlando, ODF



Photos courtesy Pat Breen, Oregon State University



The three-lobed leaves of paperbark maples turn a vibrant red in the fall and sometimes hang on the tree well into winter.

Leaves, shape, and bark provide extraordinary beauty in the fall and winter

Late in autumn, later than most other maples and other deciduous trees, the paperbark maple begins its own leaf show – leaves of yellow to orange, dark or vibrant reds, and even scarlet, crimson, or pink. These leaves hang on the tree well into winter.

The paperbark maple often grows multiple trunks, even branching quite close to the ground. This gives it a vase-shaped, sculptured appearance, particularly after leaf fall in the winter. Although it can be trained to grow as a single trunked tree – why would you want to? On this tree, you want to see as much of the bark as possible, since that bark is one of the most outstanding features and the reason for its name.

Paperbark maple has coppery, orange, cinnamon- to reddish-brown exfoliating bark; bark that gets darker – purple-brown – with age. Bark begins peeling on even very young branches, replacing these purple-brown shoots' downy appearance of their first two years with peeling as early as the branch's second or third year. Bark peels in curly, translucent, papery strips that remain attached to the trunk and branches until naturally worn away. After peeling, the bark underneath is smooth and lighter tan, salmon, or rose in color. With all of this going on at different times on different parts of the tree, it is striking and always changing – extremely picturesque against a snowy backdrop.

Relatively easy to care for

This tree is suitable for sites that get afternoon sun and occasional irrigation in central, eastern, or southern Oregon, as well as the Willamette Valley, and along the coast, in areas away from salt spray and wind. Paperbark maples prefer moist, well-drained soils, but will grow in clay, sand, loam, and soils that are slightly alkaline or acidic. They are relatively insect- and disease-free, and will grow in partial shade to full sun.

However, they are not drought tolerant and if planted in warmer climates in full sun, the leaves may burn. A little mulch will help keep the roots cool and, once established, a thorough, deep watering weekly during the hottest summer months will provide the moisture it needs to thrive.

It requires little, if any, pruning, and is sturdy and resistant to breakage and damage.

A true specimen tree

The paperbark maple is not native to North America, but was brought to Europe out of central China in 1901, reaching North America soon after. It is somewhat difficult to propagate, leading to specimens being somewhat expensive and difficult to obtain, although the cost is becoming more reasonable and it is more widely available than it used to be.

The paperbark maple's unsurpassed fall and winter interest make this a true "specimen" tree for landscape gardens. Plant this tree where it can be viewed throughout the seasons – near decks and patios, even up-lighting it for night viewing.

A stately ornamental suitable for both gardens and small landscapes, the paperbark maple is one tree that should be considered more often. 🍁