

It's a Leafy World

Recently I've been trying (rather sporadically) to memorize the scientific terms for different leaf shapes (lanceolate, obovate, palmate...) and parts of flowers (calyx, corolla, sepal...). But with my school days long past, I find myself daydreaming about leaves that can't be neatly categorized rather than memorizing the typical. And to be honest, Mother Nature has come up with some pretty wacko looking leaves! So let me share a few deciduous tree leaves that particularly tickle my fancy.

Quercus dentata is an oak native to Japan, Korea and northern China. A selection from Japan is named *Q. dentata* 'Pinnatifida' and the leaves are as amazing as the name is fun to pronounce. Known as the cutleaf emperor oak, the leaves can range from 6-12" long and have many deeply divided lobes. It's as if you took several hands worth of fingers and lined them up along both sides of a mid-rib. Fall color is not spectacular, but the leaves occasionally show some yellow, red or orange before dropping in the late autumn. References are vague as to ultimate height, but it grows quite slowly, 6-16" per year. Growers have reported 10' in 10 years. This oak is one to grow if you like to puzzle your friends. When I take a plant to the Farmer's Market, maybe one in ten people who see it can identify it as an oak.

I know I've mentioned ginkgo trees in the past, and yes, I'm going to do it again. *Ginkgo biloba* 'Saratoga' is a selection introduced by Saratoga Horticultural Foundation years ago for the dramatic shape of the leaf. The typical ginkgo leaf is grassy green and fan shaped. Stretch out that fan like a rubber band until you have a leaf about 6" long and slender, with the two lobes almost completely separated, like an elegant fishtail. There—you've got a Saratoga ginkgo leaf. This cultivar is also known for having a distinct central leader, and has a vivid yellow-gold fall color.

Another leaf with divisions so deep that the parts are barely connected belongs to *Acer pentaphyllum*. This very rare maple is native to China. 'Penta' refers to the five very narrow, 3" long leaflets that are joined only at the end of the leafstalk. This tree can cause even a seasoned gardener to fret since it leafs out extremely late, sometimes not until June! It grows very slowly, supposedly to over 20' but usually less than 15'. The fresh-looking medium green leaves have a nice fall color, ranging from yellow to crimson. It is reportedly difficult to germinate, so I am delighted to report that I have a whole flat of seedlings sprouting as thick as grass. *A. pentaphyllum* is extremely endangered in the wild, and Quarryhill Botanical Gardens has embarked on a conservation program that includes planting a 20 acre forest of this delicate-looking maple.

My first glimpse of a beech leaf with frilly edges was at the renowned Western Hills Nursery in Occidental. Once again, I had not known how diverse nature could be. The only beech

leaves I had ever seen were a simple elliptic (pointed oval) shape. But *Fagus silvatica* 'Rohanii' leaves are dark red/purple with deep wavy scallops, and made me covet that tree. I managed to track some down, even though I don't really have the room to plant one in the ground. This tree, like many beeches, has the capacity to grow over 50' tall.

Our final two cool (too cool?!) leaves for the month are both birch species, but looking at them would give you no clue that they are related. *Betula pendula* is the European white birch, often planted in threes, with attractive white bark and black markings. The selection *B. pendula* 'Dalecarlica' is tall and slender, with decidedly weeping branches. It's also known as Swedish birch. But the leaf will stump you for a bit (well, it did me) before you realize what it is. The margins are deeply cut, and the leaf outline is something like a Christmas tree with a fatter midsection.

I know I keep talking about leaves that have 'deep divisions' or are 'deeply cut' but *Betula pendula* 'Trost's Dwarf' takes the cake. The leaves on this birch are like collections of tiny jagged shreds of green. This is a miniature 'tree' that won't get taller than 3'. It is excellent for bonsai or container gardens, and can be grown in the garden railroad layout to simulate a weeping willow to great effect. It's definitely one for the collector of the unusual.

May I close this month by wishing a Happy 35th Anniversary to Pacific Horticulture! This magazine is produced by a non-profit organization with a volunteer Board of Directors, and has withstood the test of time by continuing to be "...a resource for West Coast gardeners".
www.pacifichorticulture.org

~Nancy Schramm
Out & About, July 2010