

Bark

November is a good time to look at subtle attractions for your winter garden, something to enjoy once the colorful autumn leaves have dropped from the trees. You might think that there's not much going on in the garden this time of year, but I hope that this column will show you that there is, indeed, something to 'bark' about.

Bark? Yes, some plants have such spectacular bark that every year I wait for the leaves on the deciduous ones to fall so that the trunk and branches are exposed. 'Paperbark', 'corkbark'; when you see these descriptives included in a common name, you know that something special is going to happen when that tree gets a few years old.

Our first example is the paperbark maple, *Acer griseum*. This is a well-behaved, medium sized maple tree, growing slowly to about 25' tall and a little less wide. The leaves are around 2" long, dark green and 3-lobed, a dead ringer for poison oak, especially in fall when they turn brilliant red before dropping. Once they do fall, you get the complete view of the papery, peeling, cinnamon colored bark that is such a winter treat. Another bonus attraction during the summer and fall are the large (for a maple) ornamental winged seeds that hang at the ends of the branches.

Another tree (in fact a whole genus) with spectacular bark is birch, or *Betula*. Surely everyone has seen the ubiquitous 3-tree plantings of white-trunked birch trees, but many of the other species have bark that is just as wonderful. *B. papyrifera* is the paperbark birch with peeling white bark, *B. nigra* is known as the river birch and has cinnamon colored peeling bark, often exposing patches of bark colored white, tan or rust. Some species of birches are very susceptible to various insects, and should not be planted in this area. They prefer a much colder winter than we can give them, and are just not happy here. If you really want a birch tree in your yard, it's worth seeking out one of the named varieties, a cultivar grown specifically to tolerate more summer heat.

We are lucky to have a native California tree to include in this group with peeling bark, *Arbutus menziesii*, the mighty madrone. It's not the easiest tree to plant and grow successfully, but we live in the midst of their native habitat and can simply go for a hike to enjoy the sight. Madrone bark is cinnamon colored and silky looking, and it peels in large sheets to expose the contrasting green-tan new bark underneath. In spring the white to pink bell shaped flowers are sweetly fragrant, and set clusters of fleshy, long lasting red fruit.

Let's turn now and take a look at tree trunks with corky bark. The first one to pop into my mind is the cork oak, *Quercus suber*. The trunk on this tree becomes massive, fissured, and, well, corky with age. This bark is where your (real) wine corks come from. The cork

oak is evergreen, has small oval leaves, and makes a large shade tree. I saw an interesting planting of young cork oaks once, all were growing straight up, as if racing for the sky. I was told that it's not uncommon for the juvenile cork oak to send a leader up quite tall before it resigns itself to growing branches.

Another corky barked tree is the Chinese elm, *Ulmus parvifolia* 'Seiju', beloved by bonsai and garden railroaders alike. The leaves are tiny (less than 1/2") with a toothed edge, and tightly packed on the branches, which makes the bark look more dramatic. Even more so when you learn that the old-looking bark develops at a very young age. I've only seen this elm heavily pruned, but supposedly it may reach 10' in height.

One more group of trees I must include in the cork category is pines (*Pinus*), although they might be better described as having peeling corky bark. *P. bungeana* (lacebark pine) is known for how attractive the trunk and branches can be. The bark flakes off in uneven patches like a jigsaw puzzle, and exposes various patches of gray, green, tan and white.

There's just one final shrub that begs to be included. *Euonymus alatus*, the winged euonymus, is also known as burning bush because of the fall color. When cool weather hits, almost suddenly the leaves turn the brightest red I've ever seen. There are different forms of burning bush available, from over 15' tall to less than 4'. But the reason we're talking about this shrub is the striking wings that form on the younger branches. A cross section would look like a solid circle, with an 'x' drawn through it. I'll bet branches could be used effectively in flower arrangements.

So, get out there and plant it, California!

~Nancy Schramm

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