H. Jones - Jan. 2016

Paperbark Maple *(Acer griseum)* *Sapindaceae*
Genera 145 **Species** 1,900

With a centre of diversity in China, maples range across the northern hemisphere from North America to Japan including much of Europe, the very north of Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia, Himalayas and East Asia. Although it is primarily a temperate group, a few maples grow into the tropics with *Acer laurinum* being the only maple whose range actually extends into the southern hemisphere.

The Paperbark Maple is well known to horticulture and is considered to be one of the most outstanding Acers, despite being difficult to propagate either by seed or vegetative methods. It is naturally found over a wide area of central China, but the population is now very fragmented, small and in decline. It is listed as ENDANGERED. When a taxon is endangered, it is considered to be facing a very high risk of extinction in the wild.

Paperbark Maple was collected in China by the French missionary Pere Paul Farges and the Irish plantsman Augustine Henry. It was recollected and introduced into Britain in 1901 by Ernest Henry Wilson for the Veitch Nurseries. In 1907 two Paperbark Maples trees were introduced to the United States by Wilson through the Arnold Arboretum.

The plants growing in North America are descendants of these two specimens. Recent attempts have been made to acquire new seed stock from wild populations in China because the current gene pool of cultivated specimens is very small. Key to plant exploration and identification is the morphological taxonomist.

But the morphological taxonomist, who identifies through visual inspection, is becoming rare - increasingly an emeritus professor or someone near retirement. Younger scientists are drawn to molecular taxonomy, where powerful new techniques in the study of DNA have revealed interspecies connections never before suspected.

According to Gary Saunders, who holds a chair in Molecular Systematics and Biodiversity at the University of New Brunswick, at times the DNA generated answer can be wrong. He believes a trained taxonomist can look at a molecular result and know that there is cause to question the outcome.

Universities and museums know that taxonomists don't bring in the big grant dollars that medical and genomic sciences do. As those institutions becomes increasingly focused on their bottom line, they cut their taxonomists.

Taxonomists or not, the Paperbark Maple will always be loved and admired for its unique cinnamon coloured bark which is beautiful throughout the seasons. This unusual bark is very smooth and shimmers when the sun hits it just right. The bark also peels and has vertical rows of curls along the edges of the bark panels. This bark feature gives exceptional winter interest and allows this tree to be used as the star of a winter garden.

And it is not just the bark - *Acer griseum* is an excellent small specimen tree with a sculptural habit and attractive foliage. Its fine textured trifoliate leaves emerge in late

spring. These new baby leaflets are red tinged when they first come out. The Paperbark Maple is one of the last trees to turn color in the fall.

You don't see many Paperbark Maples in parks or gardens. It is very difficult to reproduce. It produces very few viable seed - the viability rate has been listed at just 1 to 8%. Even in its native habitat, this tree is not found in great abundance. The tree can be propagated by cuttings. However, the procedure is more difficult and slow than with other species. Its general slow growth rate also hampers its ability to be propagated.

Think about growing this handsome tree. This understory tree is happiest in a sheltered place with well drained moist soil. It can be planted in sun to partial shade, but full sun intensifies its fall colours.

Acer griseum

Sources

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