

Weeping Katsura
Cercidiphyllum japonicum 'Morioka Weeping'
Katsura family - *Cercidiphyllaceae*



The katsura tree is embedded in the folklore and celebrated in poetry in Japan. Katsura has been translated as the 'moon laurel'. Legend has it that a shadow on the moon is the result of a magic katsura tree which cannot be cut down.

This is good to know. We need this magical tree at the base of the waterfall in the Sino-Himalayan Garden. Each of the 22 steps up to the top of the waterfall represents a thousand foot (305 m) ascent of the sacred Mount Omei in China.

And we are lucky that it is the cultivar 'Morioka Weeping' that has been planted there. This is one of the most graceful of all weeping trees. It was named after the small city of Morioka in Japan, where it originated. The photo above shows its winter grace, softening the rock structures which surround it.

Morioka Weeping tree has a strong upright trunk with broad arching side branches covered in pendulous twigs. These twigs create an elegant cascading form. Over time this medium-sized tree becomes a thing of great beauty and sculptural elegance. We can see this in the above photo. Our VanDusen weeping katsura was planted in 1986.

Besides its elegant shape, weeping katsura leaves have a kaleidoscope of colours. In spring its leaves emerge with a reddish-purple cast and quickly take on a lovely blue-green colour through the summer. In fall the foliage will turn a bright butter yellow with orange and apricot tones. And

then scent takes over from the colour feast. The fallen leaves have the wonderful fragrance of caramel.

Where does this fragrance come from? Throughout the year this tree stores complex sugars in its leaves and then at the onset of leaf drop these complex sugars break down into their constituent parts for reabsorption by the plant. A side product of this breakdown is the release of a small molecule called maltol, and it is this molecule that is largely responsible for the heavenly smell.

It is not just aesthetics and moon magic that katsura has going for it. This tree is involved in the oldest board game in the world called Go - an abstract strategy board game for two players. Go is very complex and compared to chess has many more alternatives to consider per move. The aim is to surround more territory than the opponent. The board called goban is made from katsura wood.

Cercidiphyllum is a genus containing two species of plants, both commonly called katsura. *C. japonicum* occurs on all four major islands of Japan, southern Korea, and China as far west as Sichuan. The *C. magnificum* is confined to higher altitudes on the mountains of Honshu in Japan.

They are the sole members of the katsura family, *Cercidiphyllaceae*. The scientific name *Cercidiphyllum* refers to the close resemblance of the leaves to those of *Cercis* (redbuds). These two unrelated genera can be distinguished easily as redbud leaves are alternate, not opposite.



opposite leaves of katsura



alternate leaves of redbud

Weeping katsura grows well in rich well-drained soil. Fall color and growth is best in full sun to open or light shade. This tree appreciates regular summer watering during dry spells, especially if it is in full sun. In areas with hot summers, it is better grown with protection from the hot afternoon sun. Katsura is dioecious - the male or female flowers are found on separate plants.

<https://www.greatplantpicks.org/plantlists/view/330>

Flowering Plant Families of the World - Heywood; Brummitt; Culham; Seberg

<https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cercidiphyllum>

<https://www.soci.org/news/horticulture/newsletter-september-2015>

[https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Go_\(game\)](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Go_(game))