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# GEORGIA GARDENING

GEORGIA'S OWN GUIDE TO GREAT GARDENING & LANDSCAPING

## Digging In

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# Companion Plantings for Japanese Maples

These plants put the 'pal' in palmatum

By Helen Newling Lawson

**Japanese maples (*Acer palmatum*) are some of the most popular small trees for the garden, and with good reason.** Their graceful forms, delicate foliage, brilliant seasonal color, and manageable growth habit make them a star in almost any landscape.

The right companion plants can show off your Japanese maple to its best advantage. Follow these guidelines to get started. We turned to Erica Glasener, horticulturist and marketing manager at Gibbs Gardens (home to an annual festival dedicated to their thousands of Japanese Maples), for some tips.

◀ Ferns enjoy the same dappled shade and moisture conditions as Japanese maples, ensuring their mutual happiness when grown together. In addition to the autumn fern (*Dryopteris erythrosora*) pictured here, Japanese painted fern (*Athyrium niponicum*) is another excellent choice.

➤ Contrasting texture and color comes from sweet flag (*Acorus gramineus* 'Ogon') and Japanese falsecypress (*Chamaecyparis pisifera* 'Golden Mop').





▼ The stem color, leaf veining, and flower shape of this strawberry begonia (*Saxifraga stolonifera*) complement the leaves of the maple, making it a soothing companion through the heat of summer. Its runners will soon cover the foliage of the spring-blooming *Narcissus* 'Tete-a-Tete'.



▼ A drift of Spanish bluebells (*Hyacinthoides hispanica*) carpet the woodland floor in springtime and provide contrast to the newly emerged leaves.



## Need help choosing a Japanese maple?

Here are some of Erica's favorites

**Fernleaf full moon maple ('Aconitifolium' or 'Vitifolium')**: Large, deeply cut leaves; grows 8-10 feet tall; crimson leaves in autumn.

**Coral bark maple ('Sango-kaku')**: Yellow fall color, sometimes with apricot overtones; new growth – twigs, small branches, trunks – is coral-colored in winter and spring, not as evident in summer; grows 20-25 feet tall. One of the first trees to color up in the fall and it holds its foliage for a long time.

**'Osakazuki'**: Good fall color; tolerates Southern summer heat; grows 20-25 feet tall; crimson with orange-red undertones in autumn.

**'Ryusen'**: A strictly weeping habit; height depends on where it was grafted; brilliant orange late in the season.



▲ Japanese maples are lovely around a pond, where the water's surface holds a mirror to reflect their foliage. Water lilies (*Nymphaea* spp.) make enchanting companions.

➔ A larger specimen can accommodate oakleaf hydrangea (*Hydrangea quercifolia*) under its canopy. White accents on the annuals below provide "footlights" to brighten this arrangement.

**Far right:** Companions can also be larger trees. In the Japanese Garden at Gibbs Gardens, weeping willow (*Salix babylonica*) provides an airy frame that directs attention to the smaller Japanese maples below.





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**1** Choose plants with similar growing requirements. Erica suggests shade-loving ferns and perennials like variegated Solomon's seal (*Polygonatum odoratum* var. *pluriflorum* 'Variegatum'), hardy gingers (*Asarum* spp.), Nippon lily and (*Rohdea japonica*).

**2** Create harmony with similar foliage colors and shapes, or generate excitement with contrasting plants – try a chartreuse mat of golden creeping Jenny (*Lysimachia nummularia* 'Aurea').

**3** Japanese maples look good in every season, so use successional plantings that will too. *Helleborus*, dwarf *Iris* and spring bulbs can give way to shade-tolerant grasses like Japanese forest grass (*Hakonechloa macra*). Add low-growing conifers like dwarf varieties of Hanoi cypress (*Chamaecyparis obtusa*) for lasting structure.

**4** Use a backdrop to showcase the trunks in winter – evergreen hollies (*Ilex* spp.) work well.

**5** Find the right place for them in the understory. They need some sun for best fall color, but intense afternoon sun may cause leaf scorch. 🍂

Helen Newling Lawson is a freelance writer, marketing professional and master gardener.



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