

Hidden Treasures of the Arboretum



‘Sweet Shadow’ Sugar Maple

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY DANIEL MOUNT

No tree is more emblematic of the autumnal glories of New England’s hardwood forests than the sugar maple (*Acer saccharum*). Yet this tree of seven subspecies and three varieties, which some botanists retain as separate species, has a far wider range. Several post-glacial remnant populations occur in the cloud forests of Guatemala and Mexico, at the southern extremes of the species’ range. The sugar maple

can also be found as far west as the Dakotas and as far south as Georgia and Texas. But it is found most abundantly in the mixed deciduous forest of the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence basins, and along the northeastern seaboard, where it’s often the dominant species.

There are 16 sugar maples planted throughout Washington Park Arboretum. These 16 trees represent the straight species, as well as three subspecies, one variety and two cultivars. One of these cultivars, ‘Sweet Shadow’, stands out among all the rest for its beauty.

‘Sweet Shadow’ appeared in the late 1950s as a chance seedling in Powell Valley Nursery, a grower of sugar maples in Gresham, Oregon. Plantsman Darrold D. Belcher noticed the exceptional, deep-lobed leaves of this seedling

ABOVE: The deeply lobed, gold-colored foliage of *Acer saccharum* ‘Sweet Shadow’.

A Sweet Harvest

Maple syrup, the crop that needs no sowing or hoeing, was part of the Native American diet long before Europeans landed on this continent. According to legend, woodpeckers taught the Algonquin tribes to “drink” the sap of the maple tree, though other legends say this knowledge came from squirrels. Sugaring season, which takes place between late winter and early spring—when the maple tree’s rising sap is sweet to taste—was a time of celebration for the natives. The first full moon of spring was called the “sugar moon,” and it was welcomed with a maple-themed dance. European settlers quickly took to this celebratory sugaring and the syrup’s energizing effects. High taxes on cane sugar kept the maple syrup industry strong until the early 20th century. Since then, production has fallen off drastically. Still, in the United States, maple syrup production in 2014 totaled 3.17 million gallons of finished product, down 10 percent from 2013, due to last winter’s extreme cold.

and began vegetative reproduction of it by grafting its buds onto regular sugar maples. Pleased with his new discovery, he applied for a patent in 1960 and received it in 1962, trademarking this unique maple.

A year later, in April of 1963, two six-foot saplings arrived at the Arboretum and were planted the following December. They grew vigorously; one was recorded as being 33 feet tall in 1977, a mere 14 years after its arrival. Dan Hinkley, in his 1985 thesis on the maples of the Arboretum, gave these two trees his highest rating. Today, though showing some signs of age, they are still superb members of the collection.

Yet unfortunately, the ‘Sweet Shadow’ maples are rarely seen—even though they are not far from the well-travelled gravel of Azalea Way. Growing at the south end of the Viburnum Collection,

they are concealed within a matrix of native and collection plants directly alongside the creek, just east of Lake Washington Boulevard. (The easiest way to find them, if you’re walking south along Azalea Way, is to turn right on the path adjacent the Hybrid Rhododendron Garden, follow it all the way to the creek, and walk south along the creek path until it bends abruptly at the site of the maples. Two specimens of yellow buckeye, *Aesculus flava*, stand close by.)

Both trees demonstrate the lovely open, oval crown of the sugar maple, but their wonderful, deeply lobed leaves give them a softer texture. Though they are beautiful of form and leaf throughout the year, it’s in October—when their foliage turns from green to orange—that they shine among the surrounding shrubs and trees, casting a sweetly golden shadow. ☺

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