Knowingly or not, almost anyone speaking about “Japanese maples” is really talking about just one species, *Acer palmatum*. And with more than 1000 named selections arising from that single species, the apparently endless variation found within *Acer palmatum* would seem to be enough to satisfy even the most-jaded gardener.

Indeed, the rich diversity of cultivars might also persuade one to think that this is the *only* maple species native to Japan, as if there simply wasn’t room left for another.

However, *Acer palmatum* and its monopoly over the idea of what constitutes a “[Japanese maple]” conceals remarkable truths about the biodiversity of the genus *Acer*. To the surprise of most, *Acer palmatum* is only...
one of 24 maple species that naturally occur within the Japanese archipelago! As a point of comparison, the floristically rich state of California, only slightly larger in land area than Japan, has just four native maple species. While a comprehensive exploration of the Japanese maple species is beyond the scope of this article, a brief sojourn through the most notable and garden-worthy species makes for a fascinating adventure. And the best way for a traveler to navigate this route is by leapfrogging through the subdivisions or “sections” of the genus *Acer*.

A good first stop on this trip would be the full moon maple, *Acer japonicum*. This species is located in the Section *Palmata*, as is its very close relative *Acer palmatum*. However, the differences between the two are immediately apparent. The leaves of the full moon maple are nearly round in outline and typically have nine or 11 lobes. (*Acer palmatum*, as its name suggests, has palm-shaped leaves, with five, seven, or nine deeply divided lobes.) The lobes are shallowly divided, only a third of the way to the base, creating a strong resemblance to another very close relative, our native vine maple, *Acer circinatum*. This small and graceful tree can reach as much as 30 feet high in cultivation and up to 45 feet in its native range on the main islands of Honshu and Hokkaido. It is typically multi-stemmed and its rich orange, red and burgundy autumn coloration is as spectacular as it is reliable. While not the source of nearly as many cultivars as *Acer palmatum*, the full moon maple has produced a number of excellent selections, including the gracefully weeping ‘Green Cascade’, the majestic ‘O isami’, and the delightfully ferny ‘Aconitifolium’.

*Acer shirasawanum* is yet another wonderful destination in the Section *Palmata*. Like *Acer japonicum*, this species is also a Japanese endemic and inhabits the main islands of Honshu, Shikoku and Kyushu. In its native forests, this slow-growing understory species makes a small, multi-stemmed tree of remarkable grace. In the
and its appearance comes as a surprise to many. The leaves are trifoliate, or composed of three leaflets, and resemble the foliage of the common house plant called grape-leaf ivy (*Cissus rhombifolia*). The jagged-edged leaflets emerge a soft yellow-green, contrasting beautifully against the deep-pink petioles. In autumn, these rather un-maple-like leaves turn yellow with red highlights. Found native on all of the main Japanese islands, this species occurs in low-elevation forests. In maturity, it can reach 30 to 40 feet in height. The canopy is broad and mushroom-shaped and often has branches that curve and contort with graceful asymmetry.

Arriving at the Section *Macrantha*, the traveler discovers a treasure trove. This section, commonly known as the stripebark or snake-bark maples, is famous for the strikingly banded patterns that develop on the trunks and branches of the various species in the group. One of my favorite maples in this, or any other, section is *Acer micranthum*. This large shrub or small tree can reach 30 feet in height and features an airy crown made up of slender and graceful branches. The delicate impression of the species is taken even further by the small and intricately clipped leaves that resemble bright origami birds. In the autumn, the leaves put on an unrivalled color

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**ABOVE LEFT:** The un-maple-like leaves of the nikko maple turn bright red in late fall. (Photo courtesy the SJG Bloom Blog)

**ABOVE RIGHT:** The intricately clipped leaves of *Acer micranthum*. (Photo by Crusier, courtesy Wikimedia Commons)
sequence from pink to orange to brilliant red. *Acer micranthum* is relatively common in middle and upper-mountain forests on the main islands of Honshu, Shikoku and Kyushu. However, this remarkably beautiful tree is quite rare in cultivation. Seed of the species seems to be very intolerant of dry storage, and attempts at germination are almost always very poor, which may explain why it is so rarely seen in gardens. Only one cultivar, ‘Candelabrum’, is recorded, and it appears to be only marginally distinct from the typical form.

Keep exploring the Section *Macrantha*, and you will soon discover the red snakebark maple, *Acer capillipes*. In sharp contrast to the delicacy of *Acer micranthum*, the red snakebark maple is a big, bold tree. This species can reach 60 feet high in habitat, and its attractive trunk and branches are marked with longitudinal stripes of pale green or gray set on a field of dark green or olive. The pretty leaves can be more than four inches long and are shaped like a lopsided hexagon, with the central and adjoining pair of lobes slender-tipped and prominent, and the lower pair of lobes much reduced. This Japanese endemic is found at scattered locations on the islands of Honshu and Shikoku, though it is most common in the mountains around Tokyo. True to the common name, the young shoots of this handsome landscape tree emerge bright red in the spring, and this color is retained on the petioles and stems through the season.

Traveling onward, we encounter *Acer carpinifolium*, a most unusual piece of the botanical landscape. As the sole member of the Section *Indivisa*, *A. carpinifolium* is “an island unto itself” and truly unique among all maples of the world. And, oh what an island it is! Its numerous, wide-spreading branches form a large shrub or small tree with a wide, mushroom-shaped crown. While its broad and often low crown might limit its usefulness in small gardens, a well-grown specimen — clad in its pale, yellow-green spring foliage — is a spectacular sight. But for all the beauty of this species, its appearance is deceptive, and even a maple expert could be forgiven for mistaking it at first glance. This most un-maple-like species has lance-shaped leaves with prominent parallel veins and serrated margins that are remarkably similar to the leaves of hornbeams in the genus *Carpinus*. In habitat, *Acer carpinifolium* can be found as an understory element in mixed deciduous forests at low to middle elevations on the main islands of Honshu, Shikoku and Kyushu. Only a single cultivar, ‘Esveld Select’ is in commerce. This dwarf, upright selection makes it possible for

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**ABOVE LEFT:** The captivating fall color of *Acer cissifolium*.

**ABOVE RIGHT:** The hornbeam-like foliage of *Acer carpinifolium*. (Photos by Jean-Pol Grandmont, courtesy Wikipedia Commons)
even a small garden to accommodate this lovely “island” species.

Returning to the taxonomic mainland, we arrive at the final destination on our tour, the Section Trifoliata and the elegant *Acer maximowiczianum*. Fortunately, the common name, nikko maple, is as easy to pronounce as the botanical name is challenging. This sturdy tree can reach 50 feet high in the wild and features smooth, pale-gray bark and a broad, rounded crown. It is yet another un-maple-like species with trifoliate leaves composed of three large, oval leaflets that are fuzzy and blue-gray beneath. The native range of the nikko maple includes the main Japanese islands of Honshu, Shikoku and Kyushu, as well as parts of central China. This tough, cold-hardy and slow-growing tree makes a distinctive presence in the landscape at all times of the year, but never so much as in autumn. It is then that *Acer maximowiczianum* takes center stage as one of the last maples to color, moving through a long progression of shades from pastel yellow to watermelon pink and culminating in a rich crimson that can hold well into November.

Footsore but satisfied, we have journeyed a considerable distance through the landscape of the “Japanese maples.” And all that way with scarcely a mention of *Acer palmatum*! While this remarkable species and its myriad cultivars hold a supremely important place in our gardens, I find it humbling to recall that the flora of Japan is a far bigger place than any garden. By highlighting some of the best maple species native to Japan, this trip report begins to build a sense of the country’s rich and highly varied terrain. And don’t forget—there are still another 16 “Japanese maple” species out there waiting for you to discover!

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