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Maple Sisters The Reds and the Sugars

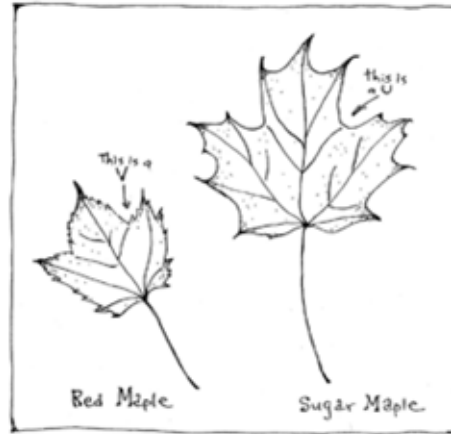
The maples! What to say first about them when there is so much that is good. In 1952, in his book *American Trees*, Rutherford H. Platt said this. "If you would see perfection, go look at the maple. It is like truth made into the form of a tree." (Dodd, Mead, and Company, NY.) What a remarkable thing to say, in print, in a small book that is a field guide. Often such portable identifiers are not much for poetry or existentialism, cutting back to just the facts. This one will fit into a pocket, or would have before the coming of tight jeans, and yet it carries the author's photographs, prose, and color plates, as well as a "Guide to the Quick Identification of Trees," organized by leaves, seeds and fruit, twigs, and then smell, taste, flowers, bark, needles, and cones. I will quote him again, this time from the very first page.

"Take any tree. Hang a sign on it announcing. Something marvelous is going on here! Everyone who has the least sense of wonder will stop to find out what is going on."

Here in New England, in the spring, we think right away of our sugar maples, *Acer saccharum*. Plenty has been written about them, and folks all over associate this maple with pancakes and syrup, and with New England. There are other maples here, about seven different kinds altogether. Walking in the woods, folks with "the least sense of wonder" will spot the sugar maple's close sister, *Acer rubrum*, the red maple. The sugar makers don't drill holes in her and hang up buckets for sap. They could, but the actual sugar maple is more productive of sugar, per gallon of sap, so that is the one the tappers look for.

The easiest way to tell red from sugar is to look at the leaves. Rutherford Platt tells us we can often find them growing near each other, making it easy to pick up both kinds of leaves and note the difference. Sometimes a mnemonic device helps. All maple leaves have a palmate shape.

So hold out your palm, fingers spread, and notice the space between thumb and forefinger. It is rounded, like a U. This is the shape of the



spaces between the pointy lobes of the sugar maple leaf. The word "sugar" carries a handy U in its spelling. The red maple leaf has no U's in the angles between the lobes, rather V's. Sugar maple: U. Red maple: not. Rather a V.

As for redness, red maples take the lead with this color, in the twigs at any time of year, in the big buds, and in the flowers. The red maple blooms before the sugar maples, and before its own leaves are out. The bulging flower buds are fat, and Platt writes, "their red, gold, orange sparkling with sap when starting to open is a sight you would want to go halfway around the world to see." Once open, the red stamens shoot out making each flower a pom-pom, so pretty against the sky. These are the "male" flowers. The "females" are red or orange, and by May have developed pairs of samaras, or what we often call maple keys. Each has a wing and carries a seed. They break from the tree and whirl down like helicopters.

Red maple keys are small, and red especially along the edges. One year my band was playing at the end-of-year picnic at a local day school, and the red maples were shedding their seeds. My instrument is a big shallow box with eighty strings called a hammered dulcimer. Those pretty little keys fell right through the strings and decorated the soundboard for years.

Red maple seeds are ready to germinate soon after they leave the tree. This is one of the ways this tree succeeds so well. No waiting around, no risking fall harvest by squirrels or chipmunks. Red maples are also called "swamp maples," and they do grow well in very wet places. In the fall, it is the swamps that turn red first, thanks to all those maples with their bright red

leaves. They also do well up on the dry ridges. Red maples are adaptable. You can dig them up and plant them along city streets, or in the yard.

Look for a maple. The pattern of branching and budding is "opposite," with twigs growing right opposite each other on the branches. Many kinds of trees have "alternate branching," with a bud on the right and no bud on the left. A little farther along there is a bud on the left and none on the right. The device for remembering which have the opposite budding pattern is "M.A.D. horse," for maple, ash, dogwood and horse chestnut. Of these, it is only the maples that have such fat, fat buds.

Here is one more tree treasure from Rutherford Platt. "The spirit of a tree is our spirit. Its art is our art. Its color, designs, and the value of its wood and fruit are ours. If you would discover what kind of life is hidden in the shadows of leaves, and behind the tough, silent bark, you must find it within yourself. Name tags and identifying features can only point the way."

— Bonner McAllester

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