



Garden Tips

Star Performers in the Garden – 2011 Trees

Introduction: The *Star Performers* series offers a quick look at a few plant species and selections that showed excellent performance throughout the growing season. Gardeners should understand that these evaluations are based only on the season indicated. Long-term evaluation is the subject of other *Garden Tip* publications.

Weather: 2011 began in difficult style. The winter offered unusual conditions including two stretches of more than 15 days below the freezing mark and higher than normal rainfall. The frozen and saturated soil conditions resulted in higher than normal loss of herbaceous perennials. The low recorded temperature was -2F, a temperature that occurred on three occasions. The spring bloom season was unseasonably wet and cool, followed in mid May by a drastic change to very warm (mid to high 90s) and high humidity. This caused significant leaf drop and widespread foliar/stem diseases such as anthracnose and similar. The summer and fall saw fairly typical temperature and precipitation.

The Plants . . .

***Ginkgo biloba* – Maidenhair Tree** – Always a top performer, this so-called living fossil seems to have outlived all its insect and disease pests. The unique fan-shaped leaves remain bright and fresh green all summer long and are usually completely free from chewing or spots. In autumn, the leaves seem to cling to green until some magical signal is cast and the entire canopy changes, seemingly overnight, to a brilliant golden yellow. The color only lasts a few days and then the leaves all fall to the ground at once. Established plants are tremendously drought tolerant. Ginkgo also wins in the horticultural trivia contest – it is one of the few broad-leafed conifers on the globe, male and female plants have completely different biochemical pathways to produce chlorophyll, and for the kicker, ginkgo pollination occurs in spring but fertilization doesn't occur until late in the fall!

***Acer campestre* – Hedge Maple** – Such an unfortunate name . . . the hedge maple actually makes an excellent medium-sized shade tree, growing 30-35' tall and a bit more in width. Summer foliage is a deep, usually glossy green that turns bright yellow in fall. It is a drought tolerant and durable performer in many conditions. The hedge maple name comes from the species' capacity to handle heavy shearing – for those who aspire to shear a tree into a hedge!

***Fagus sylvatica* 'Asplenifolia' – Fernleaf European Beech** – How does one pick just one beech? There are several specimens of this spectacular tree planted in Yew Dell's arboretum and they never seem to disappoint. This year, they looked good all spring, summer and fall. This selection is the most formal of the beeches, forming a broad conical shape with a uniform outline. Texture, as one might imagine, is very fine. European Beeches typically require more moisture through the summer than is typical in Kentucky but they performed very well this summer – as they do most summers.

Parrotia persica – **Persian Parrotia** – Grown either as a single or multi-trunked tree, parrotia is one of the most drought tolerant and durable trees we can grow. Usually topping out at about 20-30' tall, trees are upright oval to rounded in shape. Summer leaves are a dark green with fall color ranging from moderate yellow to spectacular red, orange and burgundy. Bark is dark grey, eventually exfoliating to an attractive mix of grey, green and copper. Parrotia is somewhat slow to recover from transplanting but once established, it needs little care. Prune liberally to expose the beautiful bark.

Acer griseum x nikoense '**Girard's Hybrid**' – Most tree aficionados have come to hold this selection in higher esteem than the straight paperbark maple (*Acer griseum*). Growing to about 25' tall with an upright oval outline, plants produce a lightly flaking coppery bark, excellent deep red fall color and an open branching character. It is at home in full sun or light shade, and once established, it is quite drought tolerant. Foliage stays in great shape all summer long.

Styrax japonicas '**Fragrant Fountain**' – Weeping Japanese Snowbell – Not the most common tree on the list but one worth looking for. Bright green, fine-textured foliage clothes this graceful small tree all through the summer. In late spring, delicate white bells hang from every branch giving a delightful display and a light, sweet fragrance. While fall foliage color is mostly lacking, the selection makes an excellent specimen through all 4 seasons.

Metasequoia glyptostroboides '**Ogon**' – **Golden Dawn Redwood** – Another living fossil, this unique deciduous conifer has grown, essentially unchanged, for the last 100 million years or so. But it was only recently that the gold-needed form became available to gardeners. Growing vigorously to 60'+, the narrow conical species is at home on moist soil but once established, it exhibits reasonable drought tolerance as well. 'Ogon' offers its best foliage color in full sun.

Picea orientalis – **Oriental Spruce** – We're always looking for great conifers for the residential landscape, and this is at the top of the list. While many spruce species grow to enormous proportions, *Picea orientalis* tops out at about 60' tall with a narrow conical outline. It is drought tolerant, pest resistant and holds about the best dark green winter color of all the conifers we can grow in Kentucky.

Nyssa sylvatica '**Haymenred**' (**Red Rage™**) and '**Wildfire**' – **Black Gum** – Talk about a tree with a lot going for it . . . Black Gum is naturally tolerant of difficult, poorly-drained soils. Most specimens in the wild offer excellent but mixed fall color. It has few pests and is long lived. 'Haymenred', selected by Louisville's Mike Hayman, produces brilliant glossy red fall color most years, while 'Wildfire' shows uniquely red-tinged new leaves in spring. Both are available and excellent medium-sized shade trees for the residential landscape.