



## KAT NURSERIES

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*January, 2009*

### Sugar Maple: Cadillac of Shade Trees

Well, there's good news and bad news when it comes to Sugar Maples and rather the news is good or bad is determined by whether or not you're a Nurseryman. If you're a Nurseryman it seems like all the news now-a-days is bad and this is no exception. Sugar Maples of all kinds (except Caddos) are over supplied. This is good news for L.A.'s, Designers, home-owners, and society in general. This majestic shade tree has a reputation for being difficult for growers to produce and hence is almost always in short supply, but not any more. On the back side of the production boom from 1999 to 2005, growers were anticipating that trees were becoming over-produced. So, like lemmings, many growers, rather than cut production, shifted production numbers to the safe bet, Sugar Maple. Now those trees planted from 2003 to 2005 are ready for market, lots and lots of them. As a consumer, be prepared to buy or spec Sugar Maple as much as possible over the next two years because the bubble will burst at some point and Cadillac won't be selling for the price of a Ford. This year will make the third year in row that West-coast producers will destroy Sugar Maple liners because of falling demand for the tree. Over that period, hundreds of thousands of these trees that in previous years were going into production across the country were instead burned or composted on the West-coast and now liner growers are adjusting the propagation of Sugar Maple back dramatically. I hope that this is a landmark event in my career as a Nurseryman, is an anomaly I can tell my grandchildren about 40 years from now. Destroying, or discounting such a fantastic and difficult to produce tree has to be a once in a life time occurrence? I hope so and hopefully consumers at large will begin to take advantage and load up the communities we live in with more and more Sugar Maple for generations to enjoy.

A number of factors came together this fall that inspired me to write this article. The first is based on where I live. Believe it or not I live in Prairie Village (for those out-of-towners it's an old suburb predominantly built in the 1950's). I would consider it an urban forest. PV is loaded with trees and for the most part they are nasty. Pin Oak, Green Ash, Silver Maple, Sweet Gum, and Siberian Elm are the dominate shade trees around town but there are some Sugar Maple and they stick out. It boggles my mind to think about how much nicer my community would be if back in the 50's they would have planted half the streets with Sugar Maple rather than all with Pin Oak, and if every Silver Maple could be replaced with a Sugar Maple. I spent a beautiful early October Sunday afternoon stewing, but I came to the realization that all I could do about it is campaign for the Sugar Maple on behalf of my children and grandchildren for the communities being built today. Then in early November on a beautiful Sunday afternoon, my wife, two-week old baby and I went to Weston Bend State Park (a park 30 miles north of KC that encompasses several miles of bluffs along the river) to walk the trails and enjoy the day. Again, I was reminded how glorious Sugar Maples are. The Sugar Maple is the dominate tree growing naturally in mass all along the bluffs. The color was spectacular to say the least, and to think under natural conditions these trees flourish and became dominant over the Oaks, Ash, Hickories and other hardwoods. It is a true testament to the durability of the tree. And then there was the straw that broke the Camel's back; as we did inventory late this fall and tallied our sales figures I discovered we sold very few Sugar Maple, especially when you compare the sales of the Sugar Maple to the Reds and Red-Silver crosses. We sold Red Sunset, a Red Maple, 10 to 1 to all the Sugar Maple combined. This has always been the trend, but it was because we could never get enough Sugars. However, this

this year we will carry over 200 beautiful Sugars into next year because they did not sell. It's sad.

So what makes Sugar Maple such a great tree? Simply, every thing about it. Summer color, fall color, strength, disease resistance, toughness and shape. Sugars aren't super fast growers, can be picky about too much water when they are transplanted and they're tough to bud. These are the reasons why growers don't normally produce big numbers of them but once established in the landscape they perform wonderfully. The number one thing that separates them from Red Maples is their strength. The wood of a Sugar Maple is very strong, which makes them long lived. This, in combination with their mature size and form, make them excellent street and yard trees for generations. Sugars are smaller and more compact than Reds or Silvers at maturity. They generally form a perfect upright oval to circular shape that is dense. The foliage is a deep green rather than a limy, or silvery green, and they will hold their deep green color through the heat of the summer and are the first to begin to color in the fall from the outside in. The color itself is variable from yellows to oranges to red. From beginning to end the show can last up to a month. Compare that to the one week display of Autumn Purple Ash. It's the classic shade tree.

So when choosing a Sugar Maple which of the many cultivars or sub-species should you use? I would say all, or any. At this point, of the true Sugars, I like Fall Fiesta the best. It has a perfect form and a huge leaf that is bright green all summer but Green Mountain, Legacy, Commemoration, and Bonfire are all tried and true cultivars that are outstanding. If you desire a slimmer look, try Belle Tower in the South and Apollo or Endowment to the North. Sugar Maples are native across a huge portion of the US and different sub-species perform better in certain parts of the country. Caddo Maples are a sub-species of Sugar Maple native to Western Oklahoma and are very heat and drought tolerant. Recently they have become very popular here in KC. They do perform very well but are hard to come by. Remember, Caddos like John Pair and Autumn Splendor were developed for their heat and drought tolerance, so if your site is irrigated, it may not be necessary to use a Caddo. The one exception could be parking lot islands. Caddos will perform in a heat island where traditional Sugars could frost crack and scorch. In the years to come, look for two new recently released selections of Sugar Maple, developed in the state of Kansas; Pony Express and Oregon Trail were selected for excellent color in Hiawatha Kansas. Don't forget about seedling Sugar Maple either, when used in mass the different shapes and colors are outstanding.

With all of the choices in the industry right now I can understand forgetting about Sugar Maple. But I would like to think that it was an accident, or maybe as consumers, you thought they were still hard to find, or too expensive. There's no excuse now; I've let the cat out of the bag. Enjoy using Sugar Maple uninhibited in designs and on projects so that we can enjoy them in our communities for a 100 years, just don't expect to get them on the cheap forever.

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