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A Closer Look at the Celebration Maple

by Bill Meyer, WSU Senior Groundskeeper (Retired)

WSU Retiree Center Newsletter, Spring 2020

A funny thing happened to our maple tree this past fall. It forgot to drop its leaves.

First, allow me to backtrack a few years. Thirty years ago my wife and I planted a hybrid 'Celebration' Maple in our backyard to shade our deck. For many years the tree has provided us with ample shade, especially during the hot, sunny days of summer. Since the 'Celebration' Maple is a hybrid of a Silver maple and a Red maple, it should provide fast growth that is characteristic of the Silver Maple plus display the intense red fall colors of the Red maple. Our tree has provided us with the rapid growth and towers above our house at a height of 50 plus feet, but the tree refuses to show the brilliant red fall leaf color that make it famous.



What annoys me the most is that years ago I planted a 'Celebration' Maple at WSU and throughout the years, it has produced a consistent, brilliant orange-red color each fall. Since it thrived so well on the grounds of WSU, I decided to plant one at home. Disappointingly, our tree produced little of the color that makes 'Celebration' so well known.

Puzzling us even more is that our neighbors have two 'Celebration' Maples in their front yard that have blazing red colors that we can observe from our deck! But our tree continued to exhibit a dry, yellow color each autumn. This year was worse. In addition to having little color, our tree sat day after day throughout the fall with leaves that refused to drop, while leaves on most of the trees in our neighborhood dropped to the ground during the month of October.

I know what you may be thinking now. What about oak leaves? Don't they fall quite late in the fall and sometimes hang onto the tree until early spring? True, but there is a rather complicated botanical reason for that phenomenon. Deciduous oak tree leaves actually die in the autumn but their leaves do not drop. This process of retaining dead plant material is called marcescence. Many oak leaves don't develop a layer in their leaf stem that causes the leaf to drop. Botanically speaking, this process is called abscission. In a nutshell, oak leaves do not have the natural ability to detach their leaves in the same time frame as do other deciduous trees such as the aspen or maple.

But why our maple tree leaves were so slow to drop was a mystery to me. They don't go through the same process of holding onto their leaves as do the oak trees. It had to be something else. I suspected the unusually cold weather that came earlier than normal might have been the culprit. This may have caused an interruption in the leaf dropping process. September was exceptionally warm but when the calendar flipped over to October, both heavy rains and cool conditions were the norm. November started out cold averaging out the 2nd coldest November on record. But blaming the weather was just a guess. Maybe it was something in the soil. Maybe it's because the tree sits in a slightly lower spot in the yard. All I know for sure is that many of the leaves on my maple tree hung on throughout the month of December. I watched as it would snow and some of the leaves overcame their separation anxiety issues and finally dropped to the ground. So, for now I carry a rake in one hand and a shovel in the other and refuse to look up at the gutters that I know are filling up with leaves one more time! --Bill



'Celebration' Maple - not Bill's!