

# Backyard Briefs

*A weekly column*

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## The Optimistic Red Maple

Have you noticed? Daylight is elbowing back darkness. The quiet winter forest now murmurs with the soft chatter of birds, but it is the red maple that is boldly announcing the coming of spring. This maple is in full bloom, and you are bound to have noticed, since it is one of the most abundant species of trees in the east.

One of the most versatile of North American trees, the red maple grows in a wide range of conditions over a variety of terrains. Most abundant in bottomlands, it thrives on disturbance and, as a result, its numbers have greatly increased since the settlement of this country. These trees are among the first to come back when forests are cut, blow-downs occur, or fire disturbs the landscape. Their ability to establish quickly has also allowed them to upsurge after Dutch elm disease, chestnut blight, and gypsy moth infestations.

Historically Native Americans found many medicinal uses for red maple, finding the bark useful as medicine to relieve pain, a wash to help inflamed eyes, and as a remedy for hives and muscular aches. We have found many uses for the wood, making it into such things as furniture, plywood, flooring and crates. The trees may also be tapped to make maple syrup. It is not as popular for this use as the sugar maple however, because of an ingredient in red maple sap called saponins (a sudsy sugar), which causes excessive frothing in the concentrated sap. Saponins also protect the trees from insects such as gypsy moths because this sudsy sugar is toxic to the moths.

The trees provide important food for white-tailed deer in winter, and harbor many cavity-nesting birds like screech owls, woodpeckers, and wood ducks. Small mammals and songbirds eat the little winged seeds. The red maple's early blooms are one of the few sources of pollen and nectar at this time of year, and are very important for insects, such as bees, that depend on protein-rich pollen to reproduce and make honey. The bursts of orange-red flowers are the first spark in an awakening landscape. It is like a "heads up" call to look and listen for signs of life in swelling buds and the tuning of voices—spring is awakening.