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Topiary Gardens

Connoisseurs of rare plants

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Greetings

This was a brutal winter- even by central New York standards. It was unusually frigid, and it seemed to persist forever. But, with a sigh of relief, we can put it behind us and begin the exciting process of planning our gardens. This year, that means more than just choosing which new Japanese maples and pines will populate our landscapes, but also, assessing the damage done by Jack Frost over the winter.

The harsh, drying winds, and sub-zero temperatures that walloped The northeast will have lasting effects long after our thermometers have thawed. Unfortunately, there is no remedy for trees that have fallen victim to winter burn. But we can help you diagnose the damage, and salvage what you can of any affected Japanese Maples.

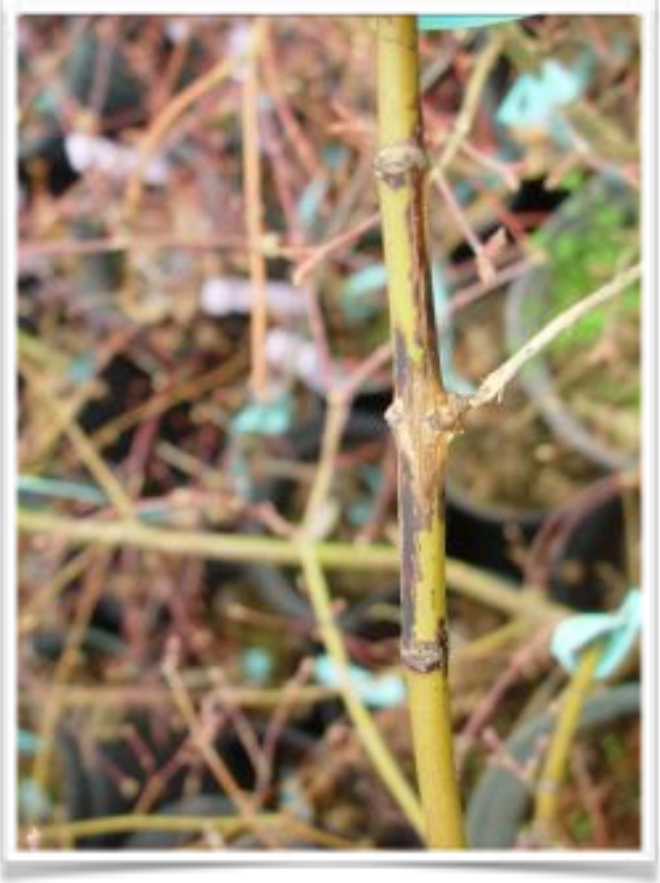
Another FAQ from our customers that we'd like to touch on is grafting. We'll give you an insiders look at how these amazing trees come to be.

First frost at Topiary Gardens

Winter Damage

With temperatures on the rise, the world will soon begin to emerge from its icy cocoon. But Spring can be bittersweet after a particularly harsh winter. As we marvel at the garden sprouting to life, and the buds swelling on our Japanese maples, we also feel the heartbreak of finding some that didn't make it through their lengthy slumber.

Unfortunately, little can be done for a tree that has suffered winter damage. The only thing you can do is prune off the dead sections and hope for the best. If the tree is in an open area, you could move it to a more sheltered nook to keep it out of the elements. Sometimes the tree will survive, and it will produce new buds along the trunk. This will reshape the tree, but at least it will be alive, and in time it will rejuvenate.



Slight damage | Branch will survive

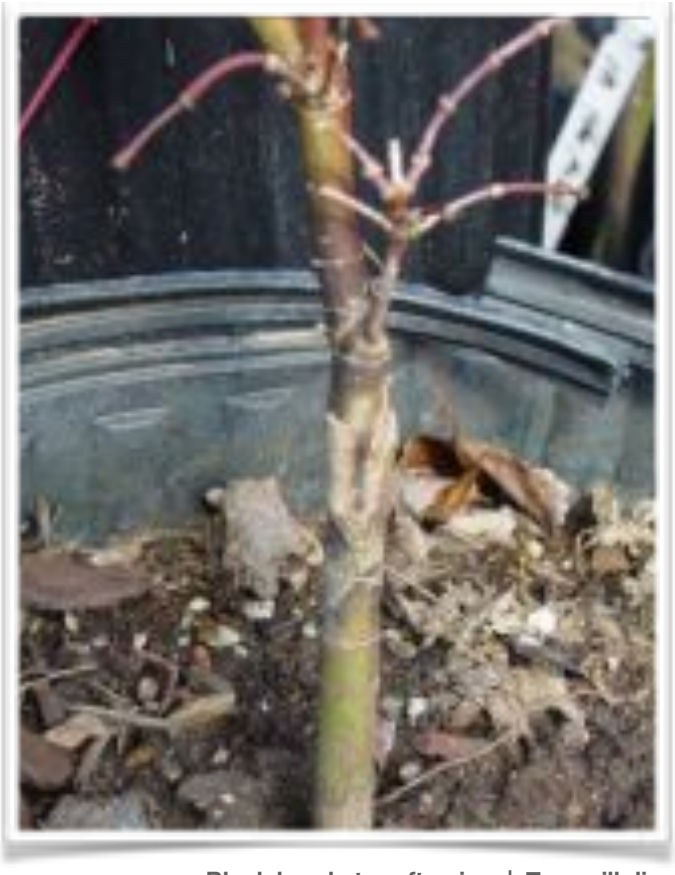
Spot damage from cold | Tree will survive

Damage at graft union | Tree will survive

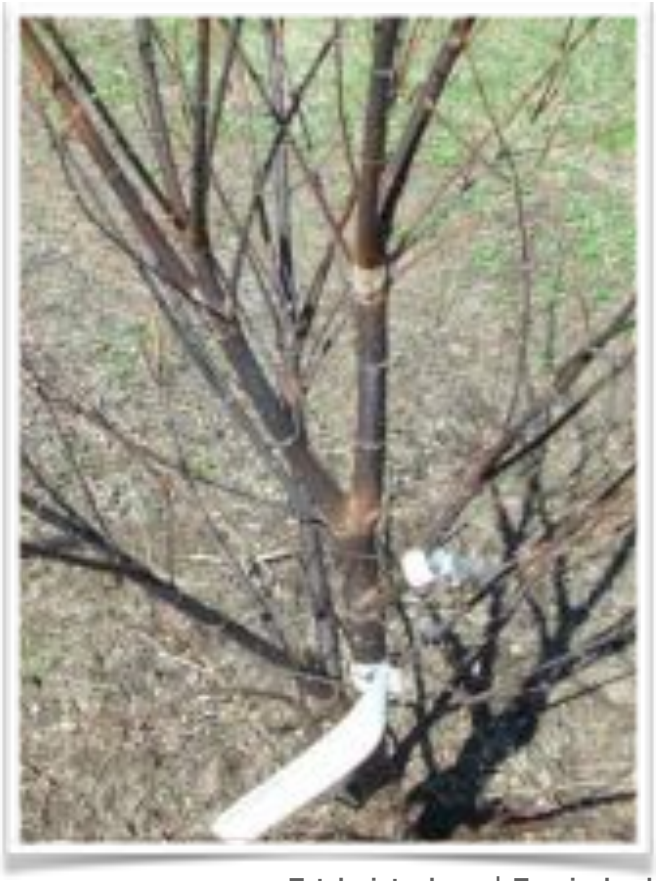
Here are some examples of what to look for on damaged trees. Black spots, rings and bands are warning signs. If a branch has a dark band all the way around, nothing above the band will survive. Even if there are buds forming, the branch will eventually die, and it will need to be pruned. Dark circles on one side of a branch or the trunk are less severe, and the tree should recover.

The best protection against winter damage is preventative care. A healthy tree with a good root system will be able to weather the cold better. Make sure your soil is well drained, because soggy soil will cause the delicate feeding roots to die.

Three years after cold damage | Scarred but healthy



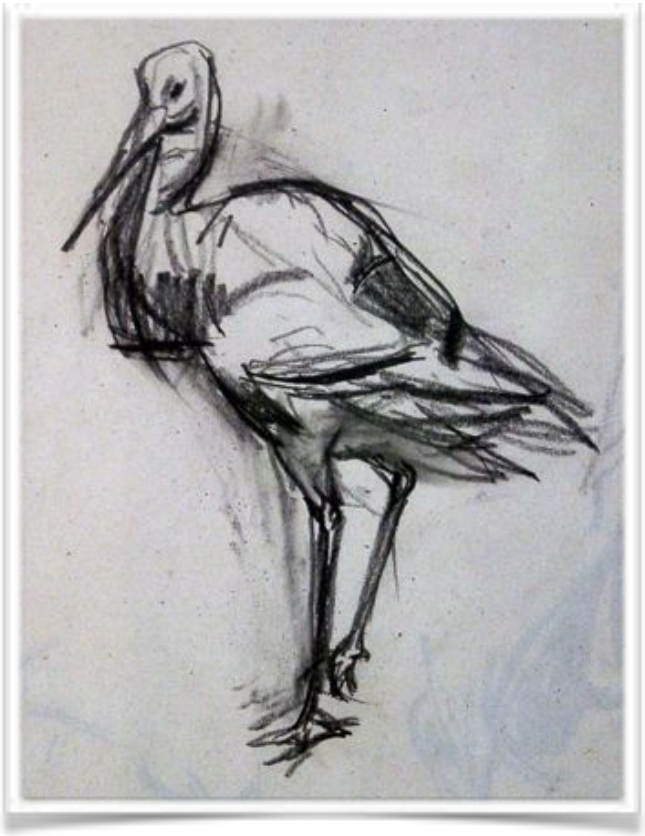
Black band at graft union | Tree will die



Total winter burn | Tree is dead

The Maple Stork

Where do Japanese Maples come from? It's a question that has most likely crossed all of our minds at one point. We browse through hundreds of cultivars on the internet, and we buy a few. A couple of days later they magically appear on the front porch as if delivered by a stork. And what about all those trees at the nursery with funny markings at the bottom of the trunk called grafts? Don't Japanese maples produce seeds? Can't we just plant them and get more of the same tree?



There are in fact several methods used to propagate Japanese maples. The simplest method is to pluck the samara (or helicopter seeds) from the parent tree in late October or November as they begin to brown and drop. Then, germinate the seeds and grow seedlings. It's a rewarding process to watch these little guys grow, but not quite as easy as it sounds. Getting them to germinate is one difficulty, and caring for them as seedlings is just as tricky. Even if you manage to get several trees to thrive, they will not be exact copies of the named cultivar from which the samara were plucked. That's because seedling maples are a product of cross pollination between two trees. You know one parent tree because it provided the seed. But the other tree could have been any nearby acer palmatum. *This is important*. Because if you grow a Japanese maple from a seed that came from an acer palmatum Bloodgood, you know you will have an acer palmatum seedling. But no matter how closely it resembles it's parent, it cannot be called Bloodgood.

It is only possible to guarantee a genetic match by using one of several methods of asexual propagation. Grafting is the most common, and that is what we do at Topiary gardens. In its simplest form, grafting is nothing more than attaching the branch of one tree to the trunk of another. The actual process is more complicated. Grafting is as much an art as it is a science.

"Man enters nature, and nature, in turn, enters man."

There is no better way to understand the beauty and fragility of Japanese maples than to graft them.

Seedlings should never be sold as named cultivars, however, they are an essential part of the grafting process. When you purchase a grafted Japanese maple, you are actually getting two trees. One tree is the rootstock. The second tree is the grafted scion (or cutting) from the named cultivar.

The rootstock used in the grafting process is nothing more than an acer palmatum seedling. Rootstock is grown until it is about the diameter of a pencil, and may be trimmed to about eight inches for ease of use.

The first step in grafting is to make sure our rootstock is clean and our knife has been disinfected with alcohol and wiped dry. Then, we select a straight part of the trunk and make a cut at an angle into the outer cambium layer of the rootstock to form a flap. (Being careful not to cut into the wood). Then the base of the scion is cut on opposite sides to form a "v" or chisel that is the same length as the flap on the rootstock. (Again, being careful only to cut into the cambium, and not the wood). Next, we insert the scion into the flap, matching up the cambium layers as carefully as possible.

Finally, the graft is wrapped with grafting bands (special rubber bands that decay in time). Regular rubber bands will degrade to fast and could fall off before the graft union is calloused or knitted together. We place a small bag over the graft at this point, which keeps the humidity high and helps the graft union callous. It also prevents the scion from loosing moisture.

Once the first leaves have opened on the scion, the plastic can be removed, and the new tree should be kept in the shade. Any leaves that form on the rootstock should be removed to keep the nutrients flowing into the graft. Once the new graft is thriving, the stem of the rootstock can be trimmed off.

Grafted maples in the greenhouse

Buds forming on the new grafts