

Yard and Garden - 03-31-2012 - Ted Griess / Extension Horticulture Assistant

Associations exist between plants and holidays. For example, when we think of poinsettia, we generally think Christmas. Shamrocks and Saint Patrick's Day go hand in hand. With Easter one week away, what plant comes to mind? Chances are you answered *Lilium longiflorum*, more commonly known as the Easter lily. Although the Easter lily is the most commonly associated with Easter, I am curious to know who may have answered my question with *Cercis canadensis*. This particular plant is a tree rather than an herbaceous flower, — it is the redbud tree. Before I explain how this little tree is



associated with Easter, I would first like to share some of its wonderful attributes and why it would be an excellent choice for your home landscape.

Redbud, more accurately called eastern redbud, is native to the United States and is found growing naturally throughout the East extending as far west as Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas and the eastern edge of Nebraska. In nature, it generally grows in a woodland setting. In the home landscape, it is planted mostly for its ornamental value — not its shade. By itself, it provides a beautiful spring accent, and its beauty is further accentuated when

planted near other spring-blooming shrubs and trees.

Hardy in Zones 5 through 9, redbud is one of the earliest flowering deciduous trees. Before the foliage appears, delicate, purplish-pink flowers are borne in clusters all along the naked branches. Usually redbud blooms in April, but this year with the early spring weather we are experiencing, local redbud trees are now in full bloom and have been so for nearly two weeks.

The leaves of redbud appear after the flowers. They are simple leaves — three-to-five inches wide attached to three-to-five inch long petioles and arranged in alternate

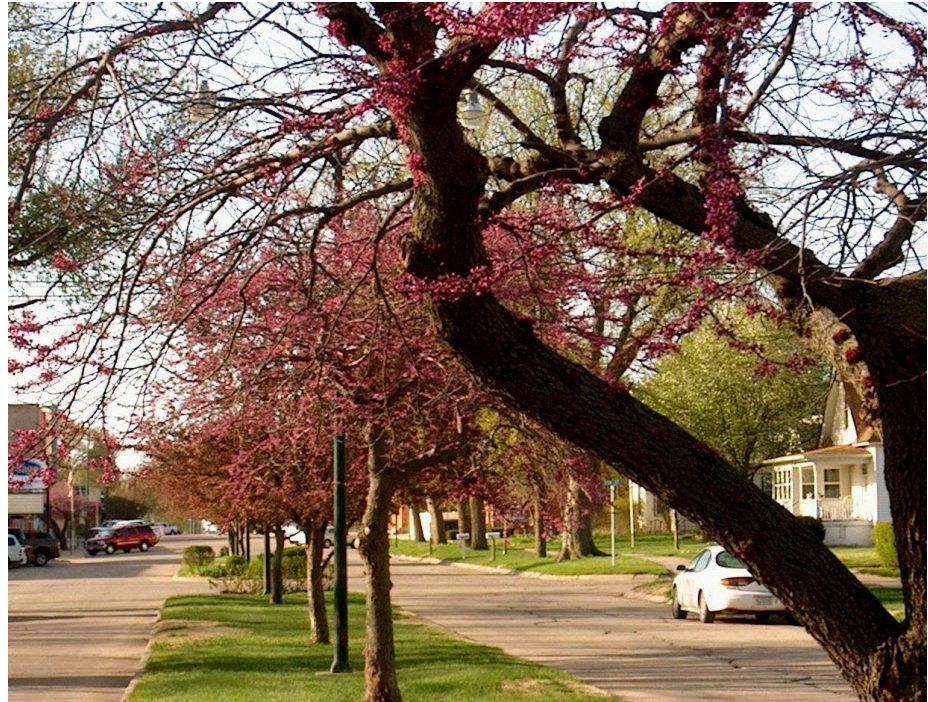


fashion. When they first appear, they are often purplish-crimson in color and turn a rich dark green as they mature. Each leaf is beautifully sculpted in a heart shape. In autumn, the leaves turn a bright yellow.

The bark of a young redbud is smooth and brown and becomes darker and more furrowed with age. The fruit of the redbud appears as flattened two-to-four inch long pods one-half inch in width. The pods hang in clusters directly off the branches, and each contains between

ten and twelve round, flat seeds. Redbuds can easily be started from seeds and often in nature will self-seed. Several cultivars of redbuds exist. *Cercis canadensis* 'alba' is one redbud that flowers pure white.

As lovely as redbuds are, they do have a few faults. They are somewhat difficult to establish. Transplanting can pose a problem. It is best to plant them in a protected area such as in semi-shade and where the soil remains somewhat moist. Wind and ice can take a toll. Redbuds are occasionally bothered with leafhoppers, scale and spider mites. Because they root rather shallowly, use caution when using herbicides in the landscape. If exposed even to a hint of 2-4D, the leaves of redbud distort, often appearing cupped and thickened.



So, where is the association between the redbud tree and Easter? *Cercis siliquastrum* is a slightly different species of redbud from those growing in the United States. According to Old World legend, Judas Iscariot, the disciple who betrayed Jesus for thirty pieces of silver, hanged himself from this species of redbud tree. After which, the white flowers turned red from his blood and shame.

Yes, associations do exist between plants and holidays. This year, for Easter, perhaps you may wish to purchase and plant a redbud tree rather than the standard Easter lily. After all, had Judas not betrayed Jesus, the crucifixion may not have occurred, and we know how important to humankind that event was.