

I hope everyone is taking time to take nature walks, both in and outside of their own yard. The other day on my own nature walk, I came across a tree that I thought was interesting and a little bit unusual, so I thought I would share it with all of you. The tree was a smaller tree, and it is seen pretty commonly in landscapes in Nebraska. It has smooth, light gray bark, and when it has leaves, they are rather large, and heart shaped. But the most notable thing about this tree is when it flowers. It is among the first few plants to flower and does so in a spectacular fashion. The branches become covered in small pink buds, but the unusual part is that these trees can also form flowers on the trunk and older branches of the tree.

This tree is called an Eastern Redbud, and is native to Eastern Nebraska. They grow as understory tree, meaning that they grow beneath the canopy of other, taller trees. As understory trees, they don't get much taller than thirty feet at maturity, though they can be anywhere between fifteen and thirty, making them ideal for landscaping plans that call for smaller trees. Because they are found in the wild as understory trees, they can tolerate lower light levels than plants that require full sun. They flower early with a gorgeous magenta color, but they have been bred to have white flowers as well. After flowering, redbud trees leaf out with interesting heart shaped leaves that can be up to four inches across. They can also be found as single or multi-stem trees, depending on what look you want in your landscape.

The term for flowering on the stems is called cauliflory. There are several kinds of plants that flower on the trunk, but most are tropical, and have heavy fruits that need the extra support from the trunk. Plants such as the cacao tree, which we get chocolate from, and papaya trees also perform cauliflory. It is possible that cauliflory makes it easier for insects crawling up and down the tree to pollinate the flowers. I don't know why eastern redbud trees flower on the trunk, but it sure does look fantastic when they're covered in pink.

One of the first things that I learned about redbud trees is that they are indicator plants. Indicator plants are used to monitor the environment for specific characteristics. For example, a variegated pothos can be used to monitor the light conditions in a green house, because with less light the plant will have less variegation. In the case of eastern redbuds, they can be used as indicator plants for the presence of herbicides. This is because they have a high sensitivity to the presence of herbicides. If they are exposed, the leaves will not have the classic heart shape and will appear crinkled around the edges, or otherwise malformed. Very rarely anymore do I see a redbud that doesn't have at least a few crinkled leaves.

Right now is the time to be looking for these trees on your nature walks, because they are hard to miss with all of those magenta flowers. These gorgeous native understory trees can add a bit of color to any landscape, and a different texture than is commonly seen with their heart shaped leaves. They have two different traits that make them unusual for a Nebraska landscape. The most obvious is that they flower on their trunks. The other unusual trait is that they can be used to show the presence of herbicides. These trees are a great addition to any landscape and are fun to look for when out and about.