

Big-Tooth Maple, NICE! Choice for Fall Color

Bill Ward Boerne Chapter, Native Plant Society of Texas

The March choice for Operation NICE! (Natives Instead of the Common Exotics!) is an easy sell. Everyone seems to appreciate the big-tooth maple (*Acer grandidentatum*), the close relative of the sugar maple. Its spectacular autumn foliage is our little answer to New England.

Probably the most famous big-tooth maples are those in Lost Maples State Natural Area along the Sabinal River north of Vanderpool. Hordes of tourists hoping to enjoy the colorful foliage jam the highways in that area every fall. Big-tooth maples also grow in other parts of the Edwards Plateau, mostly in canyons of Bandera, Real, Uvalde, and Kendall Counties, including some places on the western outskirts of Boerne. A few big-tooth maples even grow along Cibolo Creek southeast of Boerne. Besides the Edwards Plateau, bigtooth maples are found at several high-elevation localities in Trans-Pecos Texas and northern Mexico and at a few spots in northern Central Texas in Bell and Coryell Counties. They also grow in the Rocky Mountains.

The common name for this maple comes from the species name *grandidentatum*, which refers to the large teeth or lobes of the leaf margin. The 2- to 5-inch-wide leaves have 3-5 lobes. During the fall the leaves turn red, yellow, or orange, depending, I assume, on the genetic makeup of an individual tree. Different trees in the same area may have different-colored leaves.

Big-toothed maples in the Hill Country commonly are large shrubs

and small trees. Largest ones may reach 50 feet high and have trunks 10-12 inches in diameter. These maples do well as landscape plants in the Boerne area, especially where drainage is adequate. Some experts say that big-tooth maples grow best where they are protected from the hottest afternoon sun. The ones in our yard survive in a variety of sites from mostly sun to partial shade.

Our big-tooth maples seem to have relatively few problems with insects and fungi, and they grow well with only occasional watering. During droughts, however, the smaller ones appreciate deep watering about once a week.

One thing that can be discouraging to some home landscapers is the slow growth rate of big-tooth maples. They hardly seem to grow at all during the first two years. This is when they are establishing an extensive root system that will ensure hardy survival in later years. Once vegetative growth starts, usually the third year or so after planting, the annual growth is distinctly noticeable.

The Boerne Chapter of the Native Plant Society of Texas provides free planting and care instructions for big-tooth maples at Boerne nurseries participating in Operation NICE!: Hill Country African Violets and Nursery, Barkley's Nursery Center, and Maldonado Landscape and Nursery. Other nurseries participating in NICE!, through the cooperation of the Blanco County Master Gardeners, are Blanco Gardens in Blanco, The Old

Lumber Yard in Johnson City, and The Planter Box in Marble Falls.

Green Cloud Nursery of Boerne and Baxter Adams' nursery in Medina both sell big-tooth maples propagated from seeds gathered in the Hill Country. Several years ago Baxter Adams contrasted the health of the big-tooth maple population in the Hill Country with that in the Guadalupe Mountains of far West Texas. The Guadalupe Mountains population has all ages of big-tooth maples, from little sprouts to mature trees. In the Hill Country there are only mature big-tooth maples. Very few, if any, saplings are surviving to replace the old trees. Why the difference? In the Guadalupe Mountains the deer population is in equilibrium with the ecosystem. In this area it is not, and virtually every new shoot of big-tooth maple is eaten. If the Hill Country remains overpopulated with deer, I assume that eventually the Lost Maples really will be lost forever.

The Boerne Chapter of NPSOT already has planted several bigtooth maples at two places on the new hike-and-bike trail in Boerne, and there is a long-term plan to continue donating big-tooth maples to plant at other sites around Boerne. One day in the future, Boerne may be a prime destination for seeing fall foliage.