

*“Listen to the trees as they sway in the wind.
Their leaves are telling secrets. Their bark sings
songs of olden days as it grows around the
trunks. And their roots give names to all things.
Their language has been lost.
But not the gestures.”*

— Vera Nazarian

January and February are often called “the dead of winter.” Nothing is blooming; our honey bees are dependent solely on stored resources, right? Well, at least here in Piedmont North Carolina, that’s simply not true. Around here, there always seems to be something blooming; camelias are a very noticeable example. Of course, there really aren’t all that many camelias, especially in my yard (I can’t ever seem to get them to survive), so they aren’t going to support very many colonies.

Never fear, we do have at least one “super tree” that feeds our bees this time of year: red maples (*Acer rubrum*). They are everywhere in NC and are blooming profusely right now although we rarely notice the flowers. Red maples flower several weeks before they sprout leaves, so at a casual glance the trees appear to be in their winter dormancy state. But when the light hits them just right, the tops of the largest trees have a red sheen; that is evidence that they are flowering!

USDA¹ says about red maple, “Many foresters consider the tree inferior and undesirable because it is often poorly formed and defective, especially on poor sites.” Those people must not be beekeepers. For us, we celebrate the fact that:

1. They grow everywhere: “Red maple grows on diverse sites, from dry ridges and southwest slopes to peat bogs and swamps. It commonly grows under the more extreme soil-moisture conditions either very wet or quite dry. The species does not show a strong affinity for either a north or a



Some of the prettiest flowers that you may never see belong to red maples. They are blooming profusely right now. Photo: Paul Wray, Iowa State University, Bugwood.org

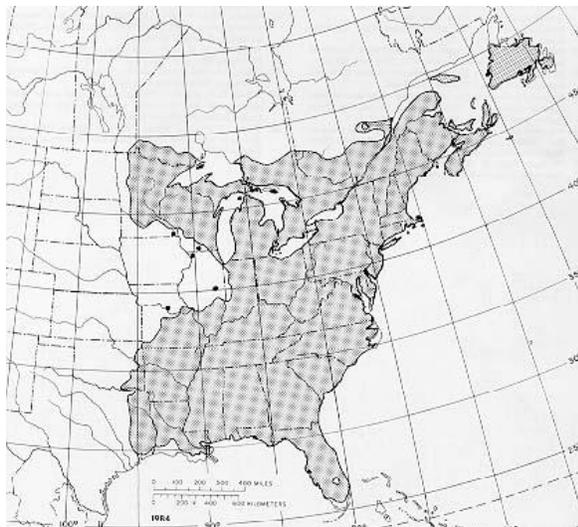
south aspect. Although it develops best on moderately well-drained, moist sites at low to intermediate elevations, it is common in mountainous country on the drier ridges and on south and west exposures of upper slopes. It is also common, however, in swampy areas, on slow-draining flats and depressions, and along small sluggish streams.”

2. They flower when few other plants do: “Red maple is one of the first trees to flower in the spring.”
3. They produce flowers quickly: “Trees can flower and bear seed at an early age; 4-year-old trees have produced seed.”
4. They are prolific: “Flowering occurs on all branches in the well-lit upper portion of the crown.”
5. They are dependable: “A seed crop occurs almost every year, and on an average, a good to bumper crop occurs once in every 2 years.”

Yet another reason to love red maples is that they produce abundant amounts of both pollen and nectar. With not much else blooming, the nectar is readily consumed and doesn’t yield a surplus. The pollen is used to make bee bread, which is eaten by nurse bees

1

https://www.srs.fs.usda.gov/pubs/misc/ag_654/volume_2/acer/rubrum.htm



The native range of the red maple includes all of eastern North America. Source: [USDA](#)

so that their bodies can create brood jelly and also is fed directly to developing larvae.

For our colonies, after a short winter break, brood rearing begins again in January, fueled by red maple nectar and pollen. The demands of the brood-rearing “food furnace” grow rapidly in just a few weeks. Any day when the weather allows flight (low/mid 50’s, no rain), honey bees eagerly work red maples. In the Piedmont, the weather cooperates on most days: in [Durham](#), February’s average high temperature is 53 degrees, good enough for an industrious honey bee to go out foraging. Average rainfall in February is less than 3 ½ inches, the lowest of any month.

Regarding the red maple, John Lovell² said, “The maples bloom so early in the season that

their value as honey plants is usually greatly underestimated. In early spring the colonies are so weak that a surplus from this source is seldom obtained, and the maples are regarded as important only for brood-rearing.” He goes on to say, “The scarlet flowers appear in early spring before the leaves, and yield large quantities of pollen and considerable nectar; but the weather is often so cold and stormy that it prevents the bees from flying freely.” Aren’t we blessed that the last statement isn’t true for those of us in the Piedmont? Even so, the full benefit of maples is constrained by the low population of foragers available at this time of year to go out and harvest from them.

Are beekeepers more in-tune with nature than Normal People? That may or may not be true, but it should be. We depend on the bounty of our environment to provide resources for our tiny little livestock, and I feel that we should recognize, appreciate and celebrate the plants that go the extra mile for our honey bees. Hurray for red maples!

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Spring [edit]			
Trees and shrubs – Spring [edit]			
Common name ↕	Latin name ↕	Blooming months ↕	Pollen color
Maple	<i>Acer</i> spp.	Feb – Apr	light yellow
Manitoba Maple (Box elder)	<i>Acer negundo</i>	Feb – Apr	light olive
Norway maple	<i>Acer platanoides</i>	Apr – May	yellow green, olive
Red Maple	<i>Acer rubrum</i>	Mar – Apr	grey brown
Grey Alder	<i>Alnus incana</i>	Feb – Apr	brownish yellow

As shown in the table on the left, *Acer rubrum* isn’t the only maple that blooms in late winter. However, it is the one with the distinctive putty-colored pollen. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_pollen_sources

² Lovell, John H., [Honey Plants of North America](#), The A.I. Root Co., Medina, Ohio, 1926, p. 155.