REDBUD

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Illustrated by Lucile Walton

THREE main colors which were not present in winter appear in our woods in mid-spring, white, pink and a pale lime-green. The white comes first from the shadbush and then from the flowering dogwood, the green is produced by the first tender little leaves of the willows, and the pink is the redbud.

Cercis canadensis, our redbud, is mainly native to the Southeast, despite its scientific name, although it does have a sporadic distribution farther north and is cultivated as an ornamental in many places. It is a large shrub or small tree belonging to the extensive pea family or Leguminosae. Within this family it is classified into a smaller group which also contains the Kentucky Coffee Tree, the Honey Locust, the Partridge Pea and Senna.

Most of the Leguminosae, including redbud, have what are known as papilionaceous flowers in which the 5-partite corolla is arranged into a standard, or large posterior petal, and two lateral wings overhanging a central keel composed of the last two petals, united. Actually in Cercis the standard is smaller than the wings and enclosed by them in the bud, and the keel petals are larger and not united, but the general form is still that found in nearly all members of the pea family. There are ten curved stamens. The fruit is a legume, that is, a bilaterally symmetrical pod produced from a one-chambered ovary and usually containing several seeds of the pea and bean variety.

Redbud flowers bloom before the leaves appear, forming dense reddish-purple clusters along the branches of the last and preceding years. The flower stalks are extremely brittle, as anyone who has ever tried to bring bouquets into the house knows to their cost. They look marvelous for one minute, then shed a layer of pink confetti all over your carpet! It is easier to enjoy them as they grow out in the wild.

In contrast to the compound leaves of many leguminous plants, the leaves of Cercis are simple and almost perfectly heart-shaped, smooth and glossy above, paler and sometimes slightly downy beneath. They appear around May as the last flowers are dropping off.

The other common name for Cercis is the Judas tree, so-called because, according to legend, it was from this tree that Judas Iscariot committed suicide. There is at least one early woodcut which shows him hanging from a Cercis tree. The European species is Cercis siliquastrum, found throughout southern Europe and Asia Minor. It is a tree similar to our C. canadensis with purplish-pink flowers appearing first in spring, and smooth shining leaves coming out later. However, in the European species the leaves are much rounder, not pointed at all, and the tree itself is generally larger than the New World one, sometimes attaining a height of 40-50 feet.

In both species the flowers have an agreeable acid taste and can be eaten mixed with salad or made into fritters. They are also used in making pickles. An extract from the branches can be made to dye wool a yellowish-buff color. Otherwise the wood, although quite close-grained and an attractive ruddy color, has no particular commercial value.

The name Cercis comes from a Greek word for shuttlecock. It was given to the plant by Theophrastus, a Greek philosopher and pupil of Plato and Aristotle, who was responsible for a great deal of plant naming around 300 B.C. Siliquastrum means ‘cylinder-podded.’ The specific name canadensis is a bit of a misnomer since, except for southern Ontario, redbud is not frequently found in Canada. It could have been more aptly named after our state, since in Virginia it is a common sight along fence-rows and in woodland areas, particularly where the soil is basic, blooming in profusion from late March to May.

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