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Botanical Focus: A series of articles on the flora of the Cooks Creek Watershed

Eastern Redbud (*Cercis Canadensis*)

By David Oleksa

With winter nearly here and fall colors fading fast, it's hard not to start longing for the vibrant colors of spring. One of the most spectacular of these is the shocking pink of an Eastern Redbud in full bloom. But the beauty of this small to medium sized tree extends far after the pink blossoms disappear. The leaves which are heart-shaped seem to be a bit over-sized for the tree's diminutive stature but their bright green color progresses to a rich bronze as the season progresses. One of the oddest features of the tree is the profusion of peapod-like fruits. The term "peapod-like" is apropos since the redbud, although a tree, belongs to the same family (*Fabaceae*) as our garden pea plants. The blossoms of the redbud are edible and have a citrus-like taste which makes them a welcome addition to salads. The unopened buds can be pickled and used as a substitute for capers.

There are three distinct varieties of redbud but only the Eastern Redbud (*Cercis Canadensis*) is found here in the Cooks Creek Watershed. The redbud will grow from 15 to 30 feet in height with a trunk (which often divides slightly above ground level giving the appearance of a multi-trunked tree) seldom exceeding 6 inches in diameter. The horizontally spreading nature of the tree's limbs makes it an ideal understory inhabitant and also makes an attractive canopy for other plants. The tree therefore is a welcome addition to landscapes and the showy pink flowers which are borne in tight clusters directly on the trunks and branches make the redbud a welcome addition to any backyard. Because the tree is native to a wide range of climates (zones 4-9), it is important to plant a tree started from locally harvested seed. This increases the chances that the tree will be more cold-hardy when grown in its natural environment.



The redbud is quite hardy, tolerating partial shade but it produces more blossoms if it is exposed to full sunlight. Other than its ornamental and culinary uses, the redbud has no commercial value. The trees are said to be somewhat resistant to deer damage, however, I find this suspect since our goats did a credible job of destroying one of the redbuds on our property.

None the less, the Eastern Redbud is a beautiful tree and we are lucky to have some in our watershed.

Redbud photo from Wikipedia