

Friday's Feature**By****Theresa Friday**

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Redbud tree flowers are one of the first signs of Spring

The promise of spring is upon us. Redbud trees, with their purple blooms, are an excellent indicator of warmer days ahead. The redbuds are just beginning to bloom along the Gulf Coast.

Redbuds are small trees in the genus, *Cercis*. Trees in this genus are sometimes called Judas trees. According to myth, Judas hung himself on the related Judas-tree (*Cercis siliquastrum*) of western Asia and southern Europe, after which the white flowers turned red with shame or blood.

Eastern redbud (*Cercis canadensis*) is a moderate to rapid-grower when young, reaching a height of 20 to 30 feet. It has an irregular growth habit when young but forms a graceful flat-topped vase-shape as it gets older. The tree usually branches low on the trunk, and if left intact forms a graceful multi-trunked habit.

Redbuds usually bloom in late February or March. Small, pinkish purple pea-like flowers are produced in unbelievable profusion along the branches, and sometimes on the trunk, before the leaves appear. This habit of blooming before the leaves grow out is fairly common among the spring-flowering trees and adds to the impact of the flowers.



Photo credit: Paul Wray, Iowa State University, Bugwood.org

The leaves are 3 to 4 inches across and heart-shaped. Leaves are a reddish purple when they open, changing to a dark green in summer. Fall color is usually a poor yellow.



Photo credit: Paul Wray, Iowa State University, Bugwood.org

Redbud is a member of the bean and pea family, and you would certainly know that from the fruits. Its seeds are enclosed in a bean pod. The seed pod is a flat, reddish-brown pod that ripens in the fall. Eastern redbud seeds or pods are eaten by quail, other birds and deer. Birds will open pods on the tree to get at the seeds.



Photo credit: Paul Wray, Iowa State University, Bugwood.org

Eastern redbuds grow well in some shade in Florida. Best growth occurs in a light, rich, moist soil but Eastern redbud adapts well to a variety of soil including sandy or alkaline. Planting sites for redbud should be in an area that provides part shade in a well-drained soil. Ideally, they tend to grow best as a small

under-story tree that receives late afternoon shade. They tend to be happier in the summer time with that extra shading. The Eastern redbud tends to be susceptible to drought stress and sun scald in our hot summers. Eastern redbuds often show marginal leaf burn in the summer time, due to the extreme heat intensity in our area.

The ideal time to select and plant your redbud tree is late winter or early spring. Select trees that are flowering so that you can choose the true color that you desire. There are several redbud varieties to consider planting in your landscape. They include Mexican redbud, 'Forest Pansy' or the white redbud. These trees all have their own unique and unusual characteristics.

'Forest Pansy' redbud, or red-leaf redbud, is a variety that is a moderate grower to about 20 feet. The main characteristics include red twigs and beautiful, new shimmering, purple/red leaves, which fade to purple-green during the summer.

When caring for your redbud, remember that the bark is thin and easily damaged from mechanical impact. In addition, this tree is a poor compartmentalizer of decay. It's best to ring the tree with mulch to keep the lawn mower or string trimmer from wounding the tree.

Eastern redbud is an attractive specimen, and is especially nice in naturalized settings. Unfortunately, they are short lived. They often have a functional life of 10 to 20 years in urban landscapes due to a combination of urban stresses, diseases, and pests.

Theresa Friday is the Environmental Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.

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