

Eulogy for a Redbud Tree

By Susan Camp

Some trees become good friends. You can count on them to be there, season after season, producing flowers, leaves, and fruit for your senses to enjoy. When I looked out an upstairs window last week, I knew immediately that old friend had fallen.

For the past 23 ½ years, the view from the upstairs windows has focused on an ever-expanding redbud tree. It was a scrawny little shrub when we moved here in 1994, planted in an odd place, right on the edge of a daylily bed. The tree thrived there and grew to be a glorious specimen, the first to bloom in the spring, magenta buds expanding to lavender-pink blossoms that attracted thousands of bees that filled the garden with their buzzing for several weeks until the heart-shaped leaves unfurled. In the fall, blackish-brown seed pods appeared, making their own music in the wind, like hundreds of maracas shaken out of sync.

The redbud was a messy tree, dropping leaves and seed pods on the pathways and daylilies. We fought a losing battle every spring, spending hours pulling out seedlings that popped up all through the garden.

Huge branches were lost over the years to hurricanes, nor'easters, and the 1998 ice storm, but the tree kept healing and growing. This spring Jim and I discovered a huge rotten spot where the two trunks joined, and we knew it was a matter of time before the tree fell. Last week, it happened. One trunk is still standing, leaning against an old pergola slated for destruction this fall. Jim and I measured the redbud a few days ago: It was 40 feet tall at the highest point, with a spread of 35 feet, a total trunk circumference of 109 inches, and a diameter of 29 inches. It was the biggest redbud I have ever seen.

Eastern redbud (*Cercis canadensis*) is a deciduous, perennial shrub or small tree, native to the eastern United States and Canada and the lower Great Plains in USDA Hardiness Zones 4 through 9. A member of the pea family, *C. canadensis* has relatives in the western states, Europe, and Asia. An attractive flowering ornamental, it is one of the earliest bloomers in spring, after juneberry, but before dogwood. Redbud naturalizes easily, and often grows in dappled shade at forest edges and along roadsides.

Redbud reaches an average mature height of 20 to 30 feet with a spread of 25 to 30 feet. The dark gray-brown trunk usually splits one to two feet above the ground to form two distinct trunks. Some redbuds maintain a shrubby appearance with several smaller branches. The mature shape is a rounded vase, sometimes with a flattened top. Branches of trees growing in forest shade will grow upward rather than spread laterally.

The exquisitely beautiful flowers appear before the leaves, sprouting directly from stems and branches. The magenta, pea-like buds open to become lavender-pink blossoms that provide nectar for bees. The heart-shaped leaves are reddish in color, maturing to deep green, and turning yellow in the fall. Flat, green seed pods appear in late summer or fall and remain on the trees throughout the winter, turning brownish-black before bursting open to reveal hard, dark brown seeds.

Redbud likes full sun to part shade, needing four hours of direct sun each day. It will grow in moist, loamy or sandy well-drained soil, acidic or alkaline, although it prefers a pH of 7.5 or higher.

Verticillium wilt, Botryosphaeria canker, and leaf anthracnose can affect *C. canadensis*. Insect pests include species of wood borers, and the redbud leaffolder.

The USDA NRCS Plant Fact Sheet “*Cercis canadensis* L”; Clemson University HGIC 1021 “Redbud”; and NC State Extension publication “*Cercis canadensis*” provide information on cultivation of this lovely tree.

We miss our old redbud, but this fall I will transplant seedlings to new spots along the edge of our woods hoping that in a few years, new trees will grace us with a display of spectacular, rosy blossoms each spring.

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