



A BUSINESS SEEDED DEEPLY IN FAMILY

MAPLE ROOTS

Matt and Tim Nichols

The Western North Carolina brothers say their natural nerdiness made moving from collecting action figures to some 1,200 cultivars of maple trees a natural.

By **CHERYL RODEWIG**



Amber Ghost



Osakazuki



Peaches and Cream



Maples, maples, maples. The nursery is full and flourishing.

MRMAPLE'S HOW-TO TIPS FOR PLANTING YOUR FIRST MAPLE TREE

Matt and Tim Nichols share a beginner's guide to choosing and planting the right maple tree for your lawn.

1. Consider your space. Look at how much room you want to fill, and plan accordingly, taking into account how tall the tree will grow over time. Trees at MrMaple can range from 3 feet to 30.

2. Pick the right location. Matt says the No. 1 rule is "no wet feet." Maple trees prefer well-drained soil, so choose a spot in your yard that's away from water.

3. Don't plant too deep. Japanese maples like to be slightly raised. Dig the hole so the top of the root ball is just barely above the surface of the ground. After that, with good care and sunshine, nature will do the rest. —CR

You could say it's in their blood. From an early age, Matt and Tim Nichols were planting trees, cleaning up pollution and exploring trails in their hometown of East Flat Rock, North Carolina. Now co-owners of a local maple nursery with an international reach, they'll tell you their passion for the land and this iconic tree was inherited.

"We grew up in horticulture," Tim says. "Our father had a hobby selling Japanese maples every Saturday at the old Dreamland Drive-In flea market. We would dig up Johnny Jump Up flowers from the yard and sell succulents in his booth so we'd have money to buy comic books and action figures."

Decades earlier, back in the '50s, their grandmother began planting maple trees in her yard, mostly from seeds picked up on visits to Charleston, South Carolina.

"Tim and I grew up getting off the bus and working in Grandmother's garden," Matt recalls. "She grew as many as her

property would permit. She never grew them commercially — though many landscapers stopped and offered her thousands of dollars for her trees."

Most are still standing today, larger and more magnificent than ever, at the Nichols family home. Tim points out an *Inaba Shidare* tree his grandmother planted, its lace-like crimson leaves making an umbrella over the pond. Nearby, a dwarf *Mikawa yatsubusa* Japanese maple the brothers planted reaches nearly 14 feet, thanks to its age.

In 1994, Matt got his first job, selling daylilies at the Curb Market in Hendersonville. He learned even more about horticulture and discovered a knack for helping shoppers find the right plant, saving up enough to buy his first car. Tim took over the job a few years later, putting his earnings toward their first computer.

The two found other ways to enjoy and give back to the land. They went on hiking and camping trips. They cleaned and tested a local creek that had been polluted by a company. Eventually, wildlife began returning to the area.

"Our nursery now relies on groundwater not too far from Back Fork Creek for irrigation," says Tim, who, along with Matt, continues to test the creek. "This has caused us to be very environmentally conscious at the nursery as well."

Not every pair of brothers can go into business together, but for Matt and Tim it was the most natural thing in the world.

"I love working with my brother," Matt



Shishigashira



Shiraname



LEFT: Matt Nichols was in Japan in 2016, where he and his brother were filmed for a Japanese TV show, thanks to their love of Japanese maple trees.

BELOW: Norman Nichols, center, examines a young tree in the nursery with his sons, Matt, left, and Tim.



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says. "We have always been very close. We grew up collecting all kinds of nerdy stuff. Collecting maples fit right in."

At this point, it's quite a collection: some 50,000 maple trees of more than 1,200 cultivars. None are invasive species.

"For years, people would say, "Why are you growing over 1,000 different cultivars of Japanese maples?" They thought we had to do only the top 50 or 100 like other nurseries. We enjoy producing all

of them," explains Tim, a self-proclaimed "tree nerd" and current president of the Maple Society's North American branch. Matt is a past president.

Their home in Western North Carolina couldn't be better for their all-in-one hobby, business and passion. Six generations of Nicholoses have lived there, from their great-great-grandfather in 1917 down to Matt's two kids, both under 4.

Tim says it's home — "the mountains,

the four seasons, the fall color on the trees, and my family" — and Matt agrees.

"I moved away briefly after college to the beach for one year, and it gave me a great deal of perspective on what I love about our region," he says. "I think we live in the perfect place. We have a great climate for horticulture. Even during our warmer summer days, we get cool nights that give the plants a good recovery time. This area actually shares a lot of similarities with many of the places in Japan maples are native to."

It was when Matt moved back home, around 2008, that the two went into business together to form MrMaple.

"We grew slowly," Matt remembers, "and eventually found our niche in online sales. In our busier months, we ship out over 600 boxes of plants a week."

They receive orders from all over, even a few from celebrities, though they're not naming names. They've been featured nationally on PBS and were invited to Japan for a show about maples.

"It has been quite the adventure," Tim adds. "We didn't know how many people would come to visit and shop our nursery from around the United States and around the world."

But if they've found success, Matt says it's because they've worked together.

"It's just a part of us and our family. My grandmother never saw that the nursery has become more than my dad's hobby, but I take pride in knowing how much she would love it." ▲▲

TREE TIME WHERE TO SEE GREAT TREES

Here's where brothers Matt and Tim Nichols recommend visiting in the Hendersonville and Western North Carolina area if you want to enjoy some serious tree beauty.

Bearwallow Mountain, near Chimney Rock: Uncommon native maple trees like the moose maple (*Acer spicatum*) and snakebark maple (*Acer pensylvanicum*) on one of Tim's favorite trails, with bonus mountaintop views.

Holmes Educational State Forest, Hendersonville: Great for families because of the "talking trees" that tell visitors young and old more about themselves.

Bullington Gardens, Hendersonville: Over a dozen maple cultivars plus hiking trails, flowers and lush native habitat.

The North Carolina Arboretum, Asheville: Farther afield but plenty of trees and scenic walks as well as an impressive bonsai collection. —CR