Hidden Treasures of the Arboretum

Cercis siliquastrum—The Judas Tree

Text By Janine Anderson

If you're strolling along Arboretum Drive around Easter, pause to consider the Judas tree, *Cercis siliquastrum*, located on the north side of the small parking lot that's just north of the towering grove of giant sequoia. Its common name derives from the belief that Judas Iscariot hanged himself from this tree species after he betrayed Jesus. (It has other common names, too, with more cheerful connotations—including the love tree and the Mediterranean redbud.)

Even without the Biblical backstory, it's a tree worth considering, due to its undemanding nature and fine ornamental qualities. In late spring, small, rosy-pink, pea-like flowers cover the branches and even the trunk. The plant's alternate, heart-shaped leaves, which appear after the flowers, emerge reddish bronze, change to gray green for most of the season and then turn yellow to chestnut brown in fall.

Cercis siliquastrum is a member of the pea family (Fabaceae). The great 18th-century Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus first described the plant and gave it its species name, which comes from the Latin word *siliqua*, meaning "pod." The flowers of the Judas tree develop into flattened, purple-tinted, peapod-like structures that persist into late summer.

Native from Southern Europe to Western Asia, the plant has been widely cultivated since ancient times. It can grow up to 25 feet tall and often has a shrubby, multi-trunked habit, though the specimen in the Arboretum is a handsome, slender tree with a single trunk. It does best in full sun and moist, well-drained soil. The flower show is at its most impressive when the previous year's summer has been long and warm.

LEFT: Flowers blooming directly from a large branch of the Judas tree in the Arboretum. (Photo by Niall Dunne)

RIGHT: The tree's heart-shaped foliage. (Photo by JLPC/ Wikimedia Commons)

Soviet-Era Intrigue

The narrative of our Judas tree doesn't end here, however. Just as interesting as the tree's connection to the Bible and its physical beauty—or perhaps even more so—is the story behind how it became a member of the Arboretum collection. Enter Scot Medbury, the current president of the Brooklyn Botanic Garden.

Back in the late 1980s, Scot was a student in the Masters of Science Program at the Center for Urban Horticulture. His undergraduate degree—also from the University of Washington—had been in Russian and East European Studies. In August 1989, as a result of his background and skills, Scot joined Willis Konick, a celebrated UW professor of comparative literature, as a co-guide on a garden tour of seven Soviet cities.

As Scot relates the story, "Willis was culture, and I was horticulture. That summer proved a very interesting time to take a group of Americans to the Soviet Union, as there was much evidence of change afoot, momentum that ultimately led to the collapse of the Soviet government the following year.

"One of our tour's highlights was a visit to Soviet Georgia and its beautiful capital, Tbilisi, which boasts a magnificent 17th-century botanical garden right in the city center. Our group made a day trip out into the countryside, visiting Gori, Joseph Stalin's birthplace, and also the ancient rock fortress Uplistsikhe on the banks of the Kura, or M'tk'vari, River.

"It was there that I gathered a few pods of the native *Cercis siliquastrum* that dotted the gravelly banks of the river.

"It being the dry season, the flow of water in that very broad riverbed was reduced to a narrow central channel, with the rest of the sandy riverbed thick with naturalized *Cannabis sativa*. It was a very hot day when we walked around the caves of Uplistsikhe, and at one point we visited the rustic home of a goat herder, who offered us fresh water from his well. I asked this man (in Russian) if anyone smoked the leaves of the plant growing in the riverbed, and he just smiled very broadly.

"The entire tour, especially of Georgia, was very memorable, and it's nice to know that there is a living legacy of our trip during that historic time growing in the Arboretum!"

According to the Arboretum's historic records, Scot's Judas tree seed was accessioned in 1990, propagated, and then planted out in 1995. Since then, the tree has grown to about 15 feet tall.

White-Flowering Form

The Arboretum is home to another specimen of the Judas tree. A white-flowering

The Judas tree blooming in April along Arboretum Drive. (Photo by Niall Dunne)

form, *C. siliquastrum* f. *alba*, can be found near Rhododendron Glen, just south of parking lot #6, between Arboretum Drive and the upper trail of the Lookout Loop. It was also grown from seed acquired in 1990, but via the Index Seminum program. In this case, the seed was supplied by Giardini Botanici Hanbury, in northern Italy. Its condition was last recorded in 2013 as "good;" the plant produced "abundant pods" that year. Apart from its white flowers, alba doesn't significantly differ from the straight species.

While strolling in the Arboretum on your way to visit the Judas tree, pause to reflect on the hidden treasure trove of stories behind the Arboretum's other plants. Just like with people, many of the trees and shrubs have good yarns worth telling. ~

Janine Anderson, CPH, is an award-winning, Pacific Northwest-based landscape designer (www.anderson-design.net), garden writer, and member of the "Bulletin" Editorial Board.