

# *Parrotiopsis jacquemontiana*

## A Collector's Plant for Every Garden



BY JOHN A. WOTT

*A* lone member in its genus, *Parrotiopsis jacquemontiana* is a delightful, deciduous large shrub or small tree in the Hamamelidaceae, or witch-hazel family. Once you see it in bloom, you'll be tempted to get one for your garden. Unfortunately, it is quite rare in cultivation and usually only seen in collectors' gardens. The Arboretum has a few fine specimens that put on a lovely show in early spring.

*Parrotiopsis* has masqueraded under several names since its discovery in 1836 by the Scottish botanist and geologist Dr. Hugh Falconer in the

western part of the Himalayas. Some botanists have considered it to be in the *Fothergilla* genus, while others aligned it with *Parrotia*, another member of the witch-hazel family.

It's found naturally in the undergrowth of mid-elevation forests, from Afghanistan to northwest India. In the wild, the plant reaches a height of 15 to 20 feet and boasts a smooth, gray trunk and much-branched, bushy head. In a garden setting, it is most often a widely spreading, upright, multi-stemmed shrub and makes an ideal candidate for a large border. *Parrotiopsis* is easy to identify in the wintertime, due to the hairs covering the young, bare twigs. Once established, the plant requires little or no pruning.

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**ABOVE:** The early-spring flowers of *Parrotiopsis* look like a cross between those of a dogwood and a fothergilla.  
(Photo by Joy Spurr)

### Easy-Going, With Fabulous Flowers

The flowers—actually flower heads consisting of a tight cluster of petal-less flowers covered in bright-yellow stamens—appear in late March and early April on bare wood atop creamy-white bracts, looking like a cross between the blossoms of a dogwood and a *Fothergilla*. Because of the “airy” or “spidery” appearance of the flowers along the branches, *Parrotiopsis* often looks best when placed against a dark backdrop for good contrast.

The leaves start to appear not long after peak bloom—short, round, broadly toothed, glossy and light green. Small hairs cover the underside of each leaf, especially along the spines. If the foliage manages to persist into the fall, it often turns a bright yellow. The fruits—capsules with glossy, brown seeds—are pretty inconspicuous.

*Parrotiopsis* prefers semi-shade, although it seems to tolerate Northwest sun. It also prefers woody, fertile, well-drained, acidic soils. But again, it’s a pretty easy plant to grow and can adapt to a variety of soil conditions.

After the initial discovery of *Parrotiopsis* in the 1830s, it seemed to take some time for the plant to be embraced by the horticultural community. (The first reports of it in cultivation were from Kew Gardens, in London, in 1879.) Perhaps this is because when the plant is not in bloom or sporting fall foliage, it’s not particularly showy.

Among the different genera in the Hamamelidaceae, the witch-hazels (*Hamamelis*) are the superstars. But I think the large inflorescences of *Parrotiopsis*—which are sometimes two inches across—can give the witch-hazels a run for their money. What’s more, unlike witch-hazels, which only offer one season of bloom (early spring for most species), *Parrotiopsis* follows up its spring flowering with intermittent summer blooming.

The plant is easily propagated by seeds: You just need a lot of patience. That’s because germination can take up to 18 months! It helps if you first stratify the seeds (keep them in cold, moist conditions) for at least four months. The long germination period is perhaps the main reason we don’t see this plant more often in gardens, but

hardwood cuttings also can be taken, shortening the propagation time.

The ethnobotany of *Parrotiopsis* is interesting. The twigs of the plant are strong and flexible, and—in the western Himalayas—they are used for making baskets. They’re also twisted together to make ropes for bridges. The wood is hard and close-grained and can be used for making walking sticks, tent pegs, axe handles and more.

### In the Arboretum

The three specimens in our collection are mature 60-year-olds. All came from Oleg Polunin, of Godalming—a town in the Borough of Waverley, Surrey, England—as part of a large shipment of seed collected in Kashmir in 1956.

University of Washington Botanic Gardens Curator of Living Collections Ray Larson informed me that they were originally planted down in the old Witch-Hazel Family Collection, right across Arboretum Drive from the Camellia Collection. However, two were moved in 2012 as part of the construction of the bus and car turnaround for the New Zealand Forest project. Both plants were moved to an existing bed just to the northwest of the Witt Winter Garden, where they’re doing well.

The third plant remains in the Witch-Hazel Family area. There was a fourth plant from the same 1956 accession that was removed from the collection as part of the New Zealand construction project. But there’s good news: Two cuttings from that plant are now growing in the nursery at Center for Urban Horticulture and are large enough to be planted out in the Arboretum this spring.

Like me, Ray is quite fond of *Parrotiopsis*. “I’ve always thought it was one of the most interesting plants in the Hamamelidaceae, due to its interesting ornamental attributes—with bracts more like a dogwood than a witch hazel or *Parrotia*—and suitable size for small gardens. There is also a fine specimen in the Miller Garden.” ☺

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