Persian Ironwood

A Tough Tree *with* Stunning Bark *and* Fall Foliage

By John Wott

The Persian ironwood or iron-tree, *Parrotia persica*, is rarely seen in Northwest gardens, and yet it combines a number of very desirable traits, including adaptability and a fabulous fall foliage display. A member of the Hamamelidaceae or witch hazel family, the plant wasn't named—as you might think—for the colorful birds we sometimes keep as pets. It was named for Friedrich W. Parrot, a German naturalist, traveler and professor of medicine, best known for being the first explorer in modern times to climb Mount Ararat, in 1829.

Native to the forest region south and southwest of the Caspian Sea, the Persian ironwood is a deciduous, slow-growing, often multi-stemmed large shrub or small tree reaching up to 40 feet tall. It becomes increasingly distinguished with age. On mature plants, the smooth, grey bark exfoliates to show green, white or

ABOVE: The rich-red, early spring flowers of Persian Ironwood. (Photo courtesy the Scott Arboretum)

ABOVE: The plant's colorful fall color. (Photo courtesy Lynk Media/Wikimedia Commons)

BELOW: Persian's ironwood handsome bark gives it all-season appeal. (Photo by Niall Dunne)

tan patches beneath, much like a plane tree. Moreover, as the plant ages, the branches start to spread horizontally and seem to overarch and crisscross. As Brian Mulligan wrote in his 1995 curatorial notes about the specimens in Washington Park Arboretum, "...very interesting bark with arching branches."

Beautiful, dense clusters of coral-pink to rich-red flowers arrive well before leaf emergence in late winter to early spring. The flowers bear a close resemblance to those of their witch-hazel cousins. There are no petals, only the colorful stamens surrounded by brownish bracts.

The plant's alternate, oval to oblong, strongly veined leaves are sometimes tinged red on new growth. In summer, the leaves are dark green. In autumn, the color show continues, with the foliage turning a richly colored crimson, yellow and orange. Some gardeners feel ironwood has the best fall color!

Persian ironwood is ideal as a specimen tree, but it should be given adequate space and planted where its domed shape can be best

An Arboretum specimen showing the ironwood's arching branch form. (Photo by Joy Spurr)

appreciated. Placement is also important for appreciating the floral display: The plant's red haze of color is particularly stunning in the sunshine.

The tree tolerates either sun or partial shade. It likes a well-drained, loamy soil—preferably on the acid side; however, it seems to do well in more neutral soils, too. It even seems to tolerate harsher urban sites.

Persian ironwood usually requires little or no pruning. However, if you are going to choose one for a specimen, then it's best to have it trained up on a six-feet-or-so-high standard stem. This will give it a great shape as it matures.

It is relatively easy to propagate by seed, but it needs to go through a period of cool, moist storage. Germination is slow, sometimes taking up to 18 months. It also responds easily to softwood cuttings, taken just as the flush of spring growth is hardening. Use a rooting hormone and mist.

The tree has a relatively long history of cultivation in the West. It was first introduced into Kew Gardens from Saint Petersburg, Russia, in 1841. A number of those early collections still thrive in England. Kew has even selected a weeping form of the species, 'Pendula', which it says adds graceful weeping branches to the plant's already considerable charms.

Washington Park Arboretum has two specimens, both acquired in 1947 and located in the circle turnaround adjacent to the New Zealand Garden, Grid 7-5E. The older tree is one of three originally purchased from W.B. Clarke and Company, San Jose, California. It was planted out into the Arboretum on March 24, 1950. (Sadly, the other two succumbed to "drought.") The younger specimen was purchased from Mrs. Else Frye, on September 13, 1947 and planted three days later.

Two newer specimens were planted into the Soest Garden at the Center for Urban Horticulture in 1998 but eventually had to be removed due to their large size. Persian ironwood is a very garden-worthy plant, but it needs the right spot to truly strut its stuff. ❧

John A. Wott is the director emeritus of Washington Park Arboretum and a member of the "Bulletin" Editorial Board.

A Second Species Discovered

For many years, there was only one known species in the genus *Parrotia*, i.e. the Persian ironwood, *P. persica*. Then in 1960, a plant explorer found a "subspecies" in Eastern China, about 2500 miles away from the native range of *P. persica* in Iran and the Caucausus. Soon after, it was thought to have gone extinct. But the plant was rediscovered in 1988. In 1992, it was classified as *Parrotia subaequalis*, and it now also goes by the common name of Chinese ironwood. It's very similar in growth habit and appearance to its Persian cousin. We are eagerly awaiting this new acquisition, as well as younger Persian ironwoods for our collections.