While walking north along Arboretum Drive toward the Graham Visitors Center last May, I found myself veering off to the east. I was attracted to a small tree of exquisite shape and foliage that was in full bloom. The leaves resembled those of a double-file viburnum (*Viburnum plicatum*)—oval in shape, about three to four inches long, with serrated edges and deeply incised, parallel veins. But I was deep in the heart of the Mountain Ash collection, and the plant turned out to be a *Sorbus*—one that was unfamiliar to me.

A small tree, *Sorbus caloneura* grows slowly to 35 feet in the wild, but usually only half that size in cultivation. The foliage is deep green in the summertime, but when it’s just emerging in early spring, it is a striking bronze. Come fall, the foliage develops a rich golden or orange tone. The species name comes from the Greek for beautiful (*cala*) and veined (*neuro*).

Atop the leaves were full clusters (technically corymbs) of fragrant, inch-wide white blossoms, 20 to 30 in each group. It was a spectacular display of color, riding just above the leaves—again, much like you’d see on the doublefile viburnum. The day was cool, so bee activity was minimal, but normally the flowers of this *Sorbus* are heavily visited by buzzing pollinators.

The fruits develop in the summer, but being small and brownish, are not as attractive as those
of other *Sorbus*. If you wanted red fruit color on a similar-looking plant, you could seek out the related species, *S. alnifolia*, but you’d be getting a tree that’s twice as tall in the bargain.

Native to forested mountains of western, central and southern China, *Sorbus caloneura* also extends into Vietnam, Myanmar and Malaysia. Augustine Henry, the Imperial Customs Service agent and plantsman, discovered the species. In 1904, at the suggestion of the Henry, famed plant explorer Ernest Wilson brought seed back to England to his employer at the time, Veitch Nurseries, and they successfully germinated it and had it blooming within five years.

Seed propagation remains a popular approach for increasing one’s stock of this plant. Grafting is sometimes done, and propagation from green-wood cuttings (taken from the tips of leafy stems) should also be successful.

*Sorbus caloneura* is in the section *Micromeles*, a whitebeam group distinguished by the single-leaf shape, as opposed to the compound leaf most of us associate with *Sorbus* (such as the foliage that is found on the common European mountain ash, *S. aucuparia* or our own native western mountain ash, *Sorbus scopulina*).

Like most mountain ashes, *Sorbus caloneura* does best in full sun to partial shade and moist, well-drained soil. It’s not particular about soil type or soil acidity, making it an easy plant to site. It can attract minor infestations of aphids or scale, but these are usually not an issue on an otherwise healthy plant. The same can be said of disease issues, with only occasional specimens getting a foliar rust, *Armillaria* root rot, or *Phytophthora* root rot. The bacterial disease fire blight can also appear at times.

All in all, it’s an easy and reliable plant to grow and is worth seeking out. It’s small enough for most gardens and can be grown as either a shrub or tree, adding variety of form to its variety of seasonal colors.

The Arboretum has two specimens of this plant in its prized Brian Mulligan *Sorbus* Collection. One came from seed collected in the wild in China by Peter Wharton of the University of British Columbia. We received the seed in 1995, propagated it, and planted the young specimen in the old Lath House in 1999. In 2001, it was moved to its current location in the *Sorbus* Collection. The second specimen is a cutting from a different nursery plant derived from the original seed batch; it was planted in the *Sorbus* Collection in 2002.

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