I have often admired the two large–foliaged plants that grow on the south side of the Big Greenhouse, near to the Graham Visitors Center, and taken pictures of their blooms. They are specimens of *Mallotus japonicus*, a deciduous shrub native to valleys and forest margins of China, Taiwan, Korea and Japan. Though its foliage looks like that of a catalpa, the plant is actually a member of the spurge family or Euphorbiaceae, and so is closely related to poinsettias, euphorbias, castor oil plant and crotons. Indeed, the species was originally named *Croton japonicus*, by none other than Linnaeus himself.

*Mallotus* is a wide–ranging genus, consisting of well over 100 species native from tropical Africa to islands in the western Pacific. The genus name translates to “woolly,” a reference to the hairy leaves and shoots found on some of the species.

*Mallotus japonicus* can get up to 12 feet tall or more, and both our specimens are in that ballpark. In Japan, it is known as the food–wrapper plant or *akamegashiwa*, because—as you may have surmised—the large, oval leaves (which get up to 10 inches long and six inches wide) were used to wrap food. The young leaves are also edible when boiled, and the bark of the plant has been used to treat various gastric problems. Recent research has found that an extract from the leaf may be useful in protecting human skin from disorders related to melanin accumulation.

Interestingly, the leaves have small, translucent dots, which contain toxic metabolic substances that protect the plant against herbivores. A second line of defense is provided by the presence of extrafloral nectaries and food bodies on leaf and stem surfaces. These attract...
ants, which keep hungry herbivores at bay. Rewarding herbivore-battling ants with sugar from foliage-based nectaries is an adaptation found in many other plants, including cherries and deciduous viburnums.

Any gardener seeking a not overly large, tropical-looking plant should consider *Mallotus*. The plant is hardy from USDA Zone 8 to 10 (Seattle is in Zone 8) and easily grown in average, well-drained soils in full sun to part shade. The emergent spring foliage is an attractive red color, and the creamy-white, apetalous flower panicles in late spring and early summer are showy and fragrant. Female plants (the species is dioecious) will reward you in late summer with capsule fruits bearing orange seeds.

To acquire the plant, you may need to start small, with cuttings or seeds. (The Pat Calvert Greenhouse at the Arboretum often sells young plants propagated from cuttings and suckers, and Chiltern Seeds of England offers seeds.) But you shouldn’t have to wait long to enjoy the flowers!

The Arboretum’s specimens came from seed collected in the wild by one of the foremost nurserymen of his time: J.C. Raulston, of North Carolina State University. He collected it in the Cholla–Namdo province of South Korea in 1985. This area is the warmest region in South Korea, with very hot and humid summers, but it is also subject to long, cold and dry winters. Our plants are in a gravelly bed and get reflected heat from the greenhouse, which likely contributes to their success here.

Other *Mallotus* specimens have been grown in the Arboretum over the years but have succumbed to natural causes. If the Arboretum’s plans for a new education center (at the site of the Big Greenhouse) come to fruition, the *Mallotus* and other collection plants in this area will be transplanted elsewhere in the park. In the meantime, stop by the sunny border at the back of the greenhouse for a botanical treat.

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