

Unusual Chinese Ornamentals in the Pendleton Miller Garden

by Kendall W. Gambrill

My earliest image of China was that of a land of fable. "The way that dirt's piling up, he must be digging to China." When I first heard the word *exotic*, it brought to mind masses of people of different features, broad rivers with stubby-sailed boats, and a landscape of rocks that soared like skyscrapers with twisted threadbare trees that seemed as old as the rock. Then, as my pursuit of gardening intensified, China became fantastic. The mundane plants of the countryside and front yards that I knew were represented in China by variations of uninhibited imagination. Now there is pleasure in meeting up with examples of this vegetative exuberance in private gardens, like that of Mrs. Pendleton Miller, which is perched at the edge of Puget Sound, north of Seattle's city limits.

Mountain ashes are familiar harvest season ornaments. But in addition to the usual small tree, laden with orange berries and common to lawns and streetsides throughout the Northwest, China furnishes welcome variation. *Sorbus reducta* grows no taller than knee height and produces pea-sized fruits of light pink coloring. In the Miller garden this moderately suckering shrub has formed miniature groves; they provide an appropriate contrast to ferns and broadleaved evergreens, especially in autumn when the leaves turn bright orange-red in the company of clustered pink pearls.

Viburnums are no strangers to the Northwest scene, either. Yet we see them mostly as ground-hugging evergreens or white-flowered bushes. They also may be grown for a late season display of red fruit. Central and western China gives us another choice in *Viburnum setigerum* 'Aurantiacum'. This deciduous erect shrub has reached to twice a person's height in the Miller garden, creating an open framework from which the bunches of bright orange fruit shine from September to January.

China also is the source of choice fall foliage plants which have reached maturity in the Miller garden. *Acer truncatum* typifies the clan with leaf



Inflorescence of Cladrastis sinensis in the Arboretum, August 1, 1980. (Photo by Brian Mulligan)

shape that could stir a Canadian's heart, although it is not anxious to grow taller than 20 feet. Near the end of October and beginning of November the tree is a glowing mass of warm yellow, unmarred by brown and remaining pure until the leaves drop a week or so later. *Rhus trichocarpa* is native to Japan and Korea as well as central China. Compared to the ordinary Sumac of landscapes, this is more delicate in stem and cleaner in leaf. The moderate 15-foot stature would be appropriate in many sites, so long as one is not especially allergic to poison ivy, an American cousin. The vibrancy of the orange-to-scarlet leaf coloring in early October well repays the effort at discretion. The placement of the small tree behind a large rock at the foot of a slope—with evergreen oaks at its sides—prevents casual contact, and furnishes a suitable frame for the display.

Cladrastis sinensis is the Sichuan-Yunnan representation of a very limited genus, two other species being Asian and one being American. The small tree resembles a well-mannered locust with foliage composed of numerous leaflets and with flowers in panicles (diversely branched flower clusters). Here on the shore of Puget Sound *Cladrastis* waits until late May or June to come into leaf; its fragrant white flowers are produced in July, and it decorates October and early November with soft clear yellow tints as the leaves signal the plant's return to dormancy.

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