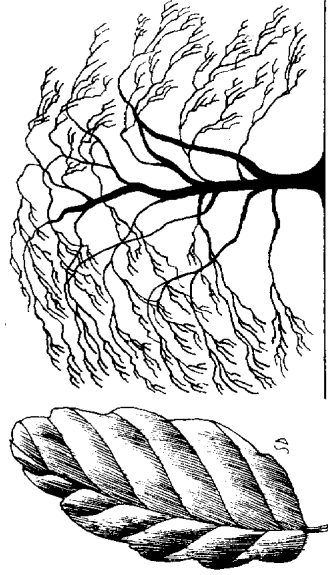


Parrotia persica

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If there is any of the schoolboy or -girl left in you then plant names can be a bit of fun, and *Parrotia persica* must surely raise a smile. There is nothing inherently funny about the name, but it does have a built-in quirkiness – it could just as easily be the name of a Persian member of the Psittacidae as of the Hamamelidaceae, a parrot rather than a tree.

Back in class, *stomata* was another word that made us smile, because it was similar to tomato – not really funny, but still you'd look across at your classmate with a knowing twist to the lips during a tedious biology lesson. *Stomata* was fairly tame – there were words with saucy connotations that would raise a bigger titter in the classroom. Schoolboy humour reached its peak in science lessons, which were the last three periods of a Friday afternoon when the weekend was too close for serious thinking. Puerile without a doubt, but a fairly innocent bit of fun by modern standards.

There are other plant names that, as long as you are happy not to take yourself or nomenclature too seriously, have something about them to make you smile inside. *Salbia uliginosa* always becomes 'Sylvia ughinosa', *cladrastis* becomes gladrags, both *cistus* and *cytisis* become cystitus; *alnus* makes me think forearms, *achillea* suggests to me a demented Mexican with a gun aimed at his wife's lover; *hippocastanum* does not bring horse chestnuts to mind. *Robinia*

is surely an elegant lady mugger, and in my mind hydrangea has always been the taller brother of the Lone Ranger. Okay, okay, enough. Let's be more serious about our subject, and if Dr J. J. F. W. von Parrot – for it is he whose name is enshrined in *Parrotia* – is up there looking down on this, then no offence meant, sir.

Parrotia is a genus with, until recently, only one known species, and you have to think that anyone whose name is honoured by being given to such a singular genus has to be someone special, and so he is. Johann Jacob Friedrich Wilhelm von Parrot was a German naturalist, traveller and scientist. He studied at the University of Dorpat, now in Estonia, but then in Russia; he travelled to the Crimea and the Caucasus, became a surgeon in the Russian army, and was at various times engaged in experiments in barometry and with the earth's magnetism. He travelled to Finland to carry out some of his experiments. His most quoted achievement is that in 1829 he was the first recorded person to climb Mount Ararat in the far east of Turkey. There is no record of him finding Noah's Ark, which is believed by many to have come to rest on the top of this extinct volcano. It was two years after that feat, in 1831, that his name was given to the plant genus that bears it by Carl Anton von Meyer, who had made a great study of the Hamamelidaceae.

Parrotia persica was introduced to the UK in 1846, when two plants were sent to the Botanic Garden at Kew from the Imperial Garden at St Petersburg. Its natural range is northern Iran and Azerbaijan, perched on the top of Iran on the Caspian Sea. Here it grows in lowland forests with other well-known trees like *zelkova*, hornbeam and medlar. In the wild its form can be very varied: it can be a large multi-stemmed shrub forming dense thickets, or a single-stemmed tree some sixty feet or more high. The same is true of plants in cultivation, though the ones I have dealt with have all been relatively young multi-stemmed, somewhat spreading plants that are more likely to make twenty-five to thirty feet – and that only after many, many years. It has the habit of grafting itself to itself when branches cross and rest one against the other. For those with patience, an eye for shape and a touch of the perverse I am sure there is an opportunity for taking advantage of this to deliberately

create some interesting sculptured branch forms. Even without any manipulation the boughs adopt striking shapes, and to add to their interest as the plant matures the trunk and larger branches develop a bark that peels off in irregular plates – in the manner of plane trees – leaving a patchwork of greys and browns.

Parrotia is a member of the Hamamelidaceae family which includes the witch hazels. Most members prefer a lime-free soil – but *Parrotia persica* is far more tolerant of alkaline conditions and, in my experience, certainly thrives on Cotswold limestone. It is generally tolerant of a wide range of soil conditions and barring waterlogged or extremely dry soils it can be expected to grow almost anywhere, given plenty of light.

It has several seasons of interest. The attractive way the branches grow give it an interesting winter silhouette (careful pruning in the early years can enhance this effect), but before winter it provides some of the best autumn colour of any tree. The hanging leaves fade through yellow, gold and rich crimson in a classy blaze of colour. Many of the wavy-margined leaves will have dark greens, warm browns, oranges and reds all suffused across their surface, making each leaf a delight in itself. Later, towards the end of winter and on bare stems, it produces its small flowers. On a well-flowered tree the colour can be seen from some distance, not as a bright beacon, more as a *hint* of colour that draws you closer to take a look. For me they are the *pièce de résistance*: nowhere near as showy as the curly witch hazel flowers, but on close inspection far more interesting. First of all, the flowers are enclosed in tough bracts covered in rich, dark brown velvet; these then open to reveal a contrasting, light, almost lime-green smooth inside. From inside the cupped bracts come tufts of pale green stamens topped with rich red anthers. They always remind me of biting into a ripe fig and seeing the mass of red flowers within. The stamens are at first short and clustered tightly together, then gradually elongate to help the wind shake the pollen into the air. I have faint memories of the flowers being scented, but wind-pollinated tassel-like flowers such as these usually have no need for scent and I can find no reference to its existence, so I suppose my memory must be playing me up. There is pleasure

to be had from cutting a few branches to bring indoors to watch as the bracts open and the flowers come out. They always hold me enchanted. As spring approaches the leathery, slightly twisted leaves start to appear; some are tinged red early on but all develop a rich glossy green surface and lots of character.

Parrotia has the English name Persian ironwood because of its very dense, close-grained, hard wood, but surprisingly it appears to have no widespread commercial value beyond making very long-lasting fence posts and weaving-shuttles in its native homelands.

There are several selections available, of which the most distinct are 'Vanessa', 'Bella' and the self-explanatory 'Pendula', all upright, tree-forming clones; each has that wonderful autumn colouring.

Its place in the garden is usually as a specimen in its own right – be sure to give it enough room. I have seen it, and in fact grown it, as a wall-trained specimen, although it is really too vigorous and a great deal of new growth has to be cut off each year to make it a practical or even an ornamental proposition. Its ever-thickening trunk eventually puts the wall at risk.

I made reference earlier to a new species of *Parrotia*. This is *P. subaequalis* from China, barely yet in commerce and still being evaluated. By all accounts it shows considerable promise as a tree for small gardens, but in the meantime I am more than happy to enjoy the pleasures offered by tried-and-tested *Parrotia persica*, familiar to all aficionados of truly meritorious plants.

Drawing by Simon Dorrell.