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Always the bridesmaid

MAURICE FOSTER finds there are some overlooked members of the genus *Staphylea* that deserve a place centre stage

COMPETITION FOR colour among woody plants is at its most intense during late April into early May, with magnolias, rhododendrons, crab apples, lilacs cherries and many more all vying for a place as favourites in the garden landscape.

Less prominent ornamental trees and shrubs are often overlooked. Some are simply not known and therefore not considered for planting, even as supporting cast.

Staphylea fall into this latter category of almost completely neglected garden plants. The common name of bladder nuts can't help, perhaps suggesting a rather unfortunate medical condition. In fact it refers to the inflated bladder-like papery fruit capsules that contain the small nut-like seeds.

It is true that some of the species have little ornamental value and are to be found only in botanic gardens and old estates as objects of botanical interest; some however are excellent ornamental plants that can compete with the best and deserve to be sought out and planted.

They are not widely available currently, although some are to be found in *RHS Plant Finder* or on line. Although they are easy to propagate,

A fine example of what is probably *Staphylea colchica* 'Grandiflora', a plant that, as with many of its relatives, is often wrongly named.

Photographs by Maurice Foster

A species of modest stature is the shrubby *Staphylea bumalda*, a native of the Far East easily identified by its flattened capsules and sessile terminal leaflets.

both from cuttings or grafting and grow on quickly, I have yet to find them in any garden centre and in May this year even outlets such as RHS Wisley, heavily stocked with rarer and more unusual plants, did not offer a single species or form.

The purpose of this article is to introduce this interesting genus and in the process offer some guidance on those species and selections that may make the best garden plants.

Overview

The genus comprises some seven to 23 species, depending on where taxonomic lines are drawn . The Mexican *S. pringlei* from the Sierra Madre is sometimes regarded as a full species or as a subspecies of the North American *S. trifolia*. In addition, *Euscaphis japonica*, according to the recent edition of *Mabberley's Plant Book*, has now been sunk into *Staphylea* as *S. japonica* along with the genus *Turpinia*. Here, the genus in the strictest sense is dealt with.

The species are distributed in discrete, widely geographically separated areas of the Northern Hemisphere, from Japan, Korea, China and the Himalaya, to the Caucasus, Europe and west and east USA. They are not choosy about soil and are generally easy-going plants which once established are forgiving of neglect. All in cultivation are hardy, including evidently the Mexican species, which came through the low temperatures and punishing easterlies of late winter 2018 without damage.

East Asian species

Staphylea bumalda is found throughout Japan and into Korea and China. A spreading slender-twigged shrub of modest size, it can be quite showy, with its myriad white flowers borne freely in broad nodding loose panicles while the small, narrow trifoliate leaves are still developing. The whole plant has a light airy character, with a twiggy texture.

It is readily distinguished from other species by its capsule which is small and not inflated, but flattened, like a miniature mangetout. Also unique is the terminal leaflet which tapers into a long point and is sessile, unlike other species which invariably have a long petiolule. It often needs a spring tidy with some dieback of its thin twigs in winter.

Also well scattered but not uncommon in western China is *S. holocarpa* which was collected by Purdom in Shensi and Henry in eastern Sichuan. Wilson, who introduced it on both his Arnold Arboretum and Veitch expeditions, described it as 'very common on the margins of woods and thickets in western Hupeh and eastern Szechuan and the most beautiful species of the genus'. Few would disagree with his assertion.

Wilson described it as a shrub or tree to 8m with variously white, blush pink, pale pink, or rosy pink flowers. The records of the Tree ➤

Staphylea holocarpa 'Rosea' is probably not clonal and it would be useful to name the best pink-flowered plants.

Register show the cultivar 'Rosea' has reached a height of 7m at the Sir Harold Hillier Gardens.

The pink form of *S. holocarpa* is conspicuous in the garden in April and May, as the relatively large cymose pendulous clusters of half inch long, clear pink tubular flowers are borne before and with the leaves. These are weather-proof, notably long-lasting and make an enchanting display along the bare twigs or contrasting with the emerging purple-bronze, trifoliate, young leaves.

It is quite easily pruned into a single-trunked. nicely balanced small tree and has pleasant smooth grey bark. White-flowered forms are seen in old gardens and these too are desirable plants. The cultivar 'Innocence' has relatively large flowers that are faintly tinged pink, maturing white.

It is a puzzle as to why the best pink form of this species in over 100 years of cultivation was not selected at an early date, given a distinctive cultivar name and widely grown. It is a small tree of the first rank and still remains relatively unknown. It has been reintroduced several times over the last twenty years and the outstanding form introduced by Edward Needham at Tregye has perhaps the richest pink flowers. The pale green capsules, not freely borne in cultivation, are not as distinctly lobed as in other species and are neither are they as conspicuous.

I do not believe that the Himalayan *S. emodi* is in cultivation in this country. It is not in the catalogue of living collections at either Kew or Edinburgh. After some inconclusive research as to origins, it turned out that the plants labelled as *S. emodi* at RHS Garden Wisley appear to be a derivative of *S. colchica*, tentatively identified as 'Grandiflora'. Whatever its true name, the Wisley plant is first class.

Native to Afghanistan and northern Pakistan and, according to Polunin and Stainton (1992), extending as far as western Nepal, the *Flora of Pakistan* describes *S. emodi* as not common and a plant of 'forest undergrowth and moist ravines'. Its white flowers are in very short 5–7cm panicles, appearing with the young growth. Its strong, straight stems are used to make

The Caucasian species *Staphylea colchica* is the most commonly encountered and has given rise to some attractive cultivars.

The appealing cultivar 'Hessei' is likely to be a hybrid between *Staphylea colchica* and *S. pinnata*.

walking sticks. Presumably because of its white streaked bark it is known as 'the snake stick' and has the reputation of repelling snakes.

Any information about this species in cultivation would be gratefully received by the author.

Europe and West Asia

Another highly effective, and the most frequently seen, species is *Staphylea colchica*. This is a big upright shrub or multi-stemmed tree and needs space. The Tree Register records show several plants across the country at or over 7m.

Leaves consist of five leaflets, but these commonly reduce to three on flowering shoots. Leaflets are as long as 8cm, finely serrate, bright green above, but with a distinctively lustrous reverse.

Flowers are borne in erect or horizontal panicles, up to 12cm long and often as wide, with both sepals and petals white. Petals are narrow and erect and nicely framed by the spreading sepals, which are sometimes tinted pale green.

The capsules are large, occasionally over 6cm long, and conspicuous through summer and into the autumn months.

Weaver (1980) reports that in its native Caucasus the flower buds are fermented and eaten and an oil pressed from the seeds is used to make a purgative.

This species has over many years yielded some notable forms and hybrids. though these are much confused in gardens. Deriving from a convoluted 19th century history, various confusions, frequently repeated in reference books, are compounded by mis-labelling and the occurrence of differing, though similar, seedling-raised forms. Sorting out the nomenclatural mess is difficult. Inadequately detailed descriptions in the literature sustain the problem.

The whole group needs careful revision and any conclusions based on current information can only be tentative, as the RHS Woody Plant Committee discovered at a recent study day.

Five hybrids or cultivars of *Staphylea colchica* are recognised – *S.* × *coulombieri*, *S.* 'Elegans', *S.* 'Hessei', *S. colchica* 'Grandiflora' and *S. colchica* 'Laxiflora'. While the descriptive information from authorities such as Bean (1988), Krussman (1986) and Rehder (1940) are often very general and incom-plete, I have outlined below those characters on which a majority of these authorities agree. It may help determine what a plant is not, rather than what it actually is.

S. colchica 'Laxiflora' usually has three leaflets, with flower panicles longer, more slender and more pendulous than the type. Krussman (1986) states that filaments are pubescent at the base.

Staphylea × *coulombieri* is believed to be a hybrid of *S. colchica* (perhaps crossed with *S. pinnata* – Weaver refers to purple-tinged sepals). There is a consensus on greater vigour with luxuriant growth, 3–5 leaflets, which are large, long, acuminate and dark green, and white flowers in more compact panicles. The filaments are totally glabrous. Only Bean notes that the leaf reverse is lustrous, as in *S. colchica*.

Staphylea 'Elegans' usually has five leaflets, panicles large, nodding (pendulous), flowers with pink flush. Bean states the plant normally seen in gardens under this name is actually *S. colchica* 'Grandiflora'. Windsor Great Park took first prize in a ➤

2017 spring-flowering shrub competition with a superb vase of a white cultivar taken from an old Frogmore House Garden plant labelled 'Elegans'. It is sometimes treated as a synonym of *S.* × *coulombieri* and might well be a cultivar of it.

Staphylea colchica 'Hessei' has pink tinted flowers, freely borne. Panicles are slender, pointed and more or less pendulous or nodding. Bean reports leaflets five, occasionally three. It could also be *S. colchica* × *S. pinnata* (*S.* × *coulombieri*).

Staphylea colchica 'Grandiflora' has inflorescences, leaves and flowers all larger, narrower and longer than the type (Krussman gives panicle to 18cm, flowers to 2cm long). No references are made to colour, so the assumption is that the flowers are white. It matches in description the plant grown at RHS Garden Wisley as *S. emodi* which is certainly a desirable plant.

There are some excellent forms of the variable *Staphylea pinnata* with purplish pink-flushed, faintly fragrant, white flowers pleasingly displayed in strictly pendulous clusters at the tips of short shoots. The sepals spread only at the tips, enclosing the petals.

One very gardenworthy pink form was shown recently to the RHS Woody Plant Committee by Dan Luscombe of Bedgebury Pinetum. It would merit a place in any garden with space to accommodate it.

Staphylea pinnata will grow to 4m and, as the name implies, foliage is predominantly pinnate with five dull green leaflets, 5–10cm long.

Although native to Europe from southern France east to the Balkans and into parts of south-west Asia, according to Bean it is naturalized in the UK and is to be seen occasionally in hedgerows and copses.

The fruit capsules are often tinged pink and can be quite decorative.

Staphylea bolanderi **is an American species with fairly small flowers only usually seen as a collector's item.**

They remain soft and supple, falling intact and unopened. The seeds, about the size of a pea, were reportedly used as rosary beads by Catholic priests in countries where it is native. It grows freely from seed and is useful – and evidently compatible with other species – as an understock for grafting.

American species

Staphylea trifolia is a native to the eastern USA, ranging from the Canadian border to the northern Gulf States. Although in cultivation in the UK since 1640, it is unsurprisingly rare in gardens as the flower panicles are drooping and small, to about 5cm. Bean describes the small flowers rather sniffily as 'dingy white.' The sepals are usually tinged green or brown, the petals white and not projecting beyond the sepals. The flower is a little over a centimetre long.

The habit is shrubby, to about 4m, leaves always trifoliate, leaflets dark green above, pale green below with a downy surface.

Another North American, native to California and the Sierra Nevada, is *S. bolanderi*. It too is rare in cultivation and not among the most decorative species. It is described as similar to *S. trifolia*, a shrub or small tree to about 6m, but its foliage is

Staphylea pinnata is a variable species including some representatives with beautiful pink-flushed flowers.

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distinctive with suborbicular leaflets. Its flowers are small, with stamens projecting beyond the petals. It has proved hardy in Kent. It remains a collector's item.

Finally, from north-east Mexico, there is *Staphylea pringlei*. My single plant was raised from seed collected by John Fairey in 1992 at 1,100m in the Sierra Madre at San Carlos in Tamaulipas. It has turned out to be perfectly hardy.

Like many disjunct Mexican plant populations related to North American species, there is always some debate about status, in this case related to *S. trifolia*. Should it be recognised at species level, or as a subspecies?

My limited experience suggests it is quite distinct from *S. trifolia* in flower. The white flower racemes are more conspicuous and bigger, both longer and broader, than *S. trifolia*.

It has not yet fruited here, but Richard Weaver (1980) distinguishes it as having fruits 'nearly round in outline rather than oval, its seeds larger'. John Fairey writes 'The wheat coloured lantern like pods are very showy and have potential for dried arrangements'.

Conclusion

Of the species, *Staphylea colchica* and various forms of *S. holocarpa* are excellent ornamental garden plants as either large shrubs or run up as small trees. They are easy to propagate, tolerant of a wide range of soils and positions, and pest free. They make first rate contributors to the spring garden.

Selected pink forms of *S. pinnata* and a well grown *S. bumalda* also warrant a place.

Of the cultivars, what is tentatively identified as 'Grandiflora' is first class, with the characters of an AGM plant. With its freely borne pink flowers, *S.* 'Hessei' also merits a place in gardens. There remains a degree of confusion about the identity of the other many good white-flowered forms. There are likely to be eminently desirable cultivars to be found in gardens around the country under various labels and it is hoped that some discussion of the genus may bring these to light, with subsequent agreement on nomenclature allowing interested gardeners to plant with confidence.

The Mexican native *Staphylea pringlei* has proved hardy in the UK.

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