

**M**Y OLD COLLINS LATIN dictionary offers only two English adjectives as a translation for the Latin 'insignis', namely 'distinguished' and 'conspicuous'. Although each has a different meaning, both apply perfectly to one of the most spectacular trees that can be grown in Britain: *Pterocarya macroptera* var. *insignis*.

A member of the *Juglandaceae*, *Pterocarya* has a chambered pith, which, apart from its winged nutlets, is the main feature distinguishing it from *Carya*. The leaves are typical of the family, being pinnate, with 7–11 leaflets. The infructescence is a pendulous chain of small winged nutlets, recorded as a magnificent 70cm long in a Kew field note for seed collected in the 1990s.

The tree was first introduced as a new species, *Pterocarya insignis*, by Ernest Wilson in 1908 from Sichuan under the collector's code W3212. It has since been seen elsewhere in western China, both in Sichuan and Yunnan. It was changed to a variety of *P. macroptera* in 1975.

In Grimshaw and Bayton's *New Trees* the morphological distinctions between the varieties are described as 'slight', with var. *insignis* separated from var. *macroptera* and var. *delavayi* by its shorter petioles (2–6cm), glabrous infructescence rachis and glabrous or almost glabrous nutlets. However, the petiole length is doubtfully reliable and var. *macroptera* overlaps in this character (4–8cm). The character that is most horticulturally prized, namely the infructescence length, is invested with no taxonomic value and is not mentioned in the original botanical description, though it must have been why Wilson chose his epithet.

### Good in the garden

In cultivation, the tree grows quickly and vigorously. Although it can be left as a multistemmed tree or large shrub, it is easily run up on a single stem and can be pruned to that effect with confidence.

A seedling planted in my garden in Kent in October 2005 has reached about 11m and is upright in growth with the crown now beginning to broaden out. It has been pruned to a clean stem to about 3m. Although planted in full sun, it continued to grow well without irrigation in spite of the drought of 2018. Although some authorities recommend moist conditions, it is in a relatively dry situation, in a light stony soil with grass now allowed to grow up to the stem. In spite of this, it flowered and fruited freely, with infructescence length ostensibly unaffected. In 14 years it has not been damaged by winter temperatures, though it is fairly sheltered from north and east winds.



# Conspicuous and distinguished

Maurice Foster takes a moment  
to marvel at the merits of  
*Pterocarya macroptera* var. *insignis*





Said to tolerate a wide range of soils, it could be planted with confidence almost anywhere. It is not a fastidious tree, a view supported by Tree Register records of the SICH 1205 collection which was planted at around the same time at Howick, Thenford, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, and Wakehurst. In spite of significant differences in geography, climate and soils, growth rates are remarkably similar.

### Closeted with nuns

A major advantage is that it does not sucker, unlike the notorious *P. × rehderiana*. In an arboretum I visited in northern Germany the vigour of the sucker growth of *P. × rehderiana* was such that it formed a dense screen of smaller trees around the perimeter of the main trunk. Curious, I pushed in through a gap in the circle to be confronted, in a commodious dream-like green sanctum within, by a congregation of German nuns in full formal religious habit. We were all equally astonished at this unexpected encounter and the nuns giggled, perhaps slightly disquieted, at the intrusion of a lone stranger in such an intimate space. They said they had gone in to seek a label. I provided the name for them and we became friendly conspirators in wonder at this amazing tree.

### Propagation

Though producing no suckers at all, var. *insignis* does produce epicormic shoots at the base of the trunk, rather like a *Platanus*. These can be pulled or cut off with a heel when the wood is semi-ripe, trimmed and used for cuttings. They will root under mist or plastic and should not be potted on, but left for the winter in the cuttings tray and kept frost free and, above all, dry. Potting on is best delayed until growth restarts in the spring.

The other means of propagation is seed. This tends to be slow and reluctant to germinate, unless chilled and kept damp, not wet, in vermiculite or inert medium in a fridge for a minimum of 30 days. Without this, and indeed even with it, germination can take a year. Seedling growth is rapid in a well-drained but not over-fertilized compost.

*Pterocarya macroptera* var. *insignis* makes a striking specimen tree where there is space to accommodate it. A good fruiting specimen displays its magnificence for weeks with dramatic flourish and is guaranteed to intrigue and delight the passing crowd.

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