



Dogwood with a bark

Jack Aldridge wonders why a plant as impressive as *Cornus wilsoniana* is so rare in Western cultivation

IT IS SURPRISING in so well-known a genus as *Cornus* that a species as exciting as *C. wilsoniana* could remain so little grown in the West. Named for Ernest Wilson, it was described by German botanist Walther Wangerin in 1908 from Wilson's type collection (W 764) from western Hubei in 1901. Some uncertainty surrounds this collection as Sargent (1988) notes confusion with *Cornus walteri*, included under the same number. It seems the "true" species as discussed here was never introduced by Wilson. Bean (1976) refers to "*C. wilsoniana* Hort. not Wanger" as synonymous with *C. walteri*.

Despite being a widespread species in China (found in 12 provinces), the eventual introduction of *C. wilsoniana* came much later than might be expected. The relatively low altitude at which it occurs (up to 1,100m) could be the reason it was overlooked by the many collecting trips that have been made to China since it reopened to the West in the 1980s. However, hardiness has not been an issue for examples currently known in cultivation.

Hangzhou introduction

I first came across this species at Sir Harold Hillier Gardens, Hampshire, where the excellent specimen mentioned by Grimshaw and Bayton (2009) has grown in a little-visited corner for over 30 years.

The tree was raised from seed distributed by Hangzhou Botanic Garden, Zhejiang Province, China. Roy Lancaster received the seed through their 1985 *Index Seminum* (no. 345), which he distributed to several gardens and growers. To my knowledge, the resulting trees represent the first introduction to Western cultivation. However, I know of only two others remaining from this introduction – at Cambridge University Botanic Garden and Nymans, Sussex – both growing handsomely. Plants listed in *RHS Plant Finder* by Spinners Nursery in 2003

Beautiful marbled bark on *Cornus wilsoniana* at Sir Harold Hillier Gardens, Hampshire.

JACK ALDRIDGE



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Cornus wilsoniana 'White Jade' (left) at JC Raulston Arboretum, North Carolina; *C. wilsoniana* is impressive in full flower (above).

must also have been of the same origin.

On the continent it also remains a rarity but Strasbourg Botanic Garden grew seed from the same *Index Seminum* where it has made a fine tree. Plants propagated from it now grow in other French gardens.

Well camouflaged

Without doubt, the highly decorative bark of *C. wilsoniana* is its principal attraction. Not unlike *Pinus bungeana*, it exfoliates to create a striking 'camouflage' in shades of green, cream, and grey. Only improving with age, it is more exaggerated in good light. Flat-topped cymes of small white flowers are borne in great profusion in early summer; an effect similar to *Cornus controversa*. Shining black fruit follow. Best flowering follows a hot summer.

The handsome foliage, to 12cm long, is grey-green with a pale, hairy reverse and best described as semi-evergreen, defoliating at low temperatures. While in forest conditions in China it reportedly grows to 40m, in cultivation it makes a small tree – the Hillier specimen planted in 1988 was 9m tall in 2022.

Later introductions

Two additional plants grow at Hilliers, both raised from wild-origin seed distributed by Shanghai Botanic Garden, collected on Emei Shan, Sichuan, in 2003. These are now beginning to show the characteristic marbled bark. Besides one other recent collection from Yunnan by plant explorer Bob Cherry which grows in a private collection in Kent, no others are known in the UK.

It is better represented in North America by more recent introductions. Perhaps the finest example in US cultivation grows at the JC Raulston Arboretum, North Carolina, and has been given the clonal name

'White Jade' for its ghostly ash-white bark. It has been propagated and distributed in the US and grafted plants are apparently growing in the UK now.

Horticultural horoscope

While easy from seed, the propensity of *Cornus* species to hybridize means that plants grown from garden seed should be treated with caution and vegetative propagation is preferable. Successful grafting onto *C. kousa* is reported but this is unnecessary since *C. wilsoniana* roots easily from semi-ripe cuttings taken in summer, struck under polythene with gentle bottom heat.

Cornus wilsoniana demands wider recognition. Its exquisite bark – given prominence by judicious pruning – puts it in the first rank of small trees grown for stem effect and it is hoped that the few trees in Western cultivation might be propagated and made available. If this can be done there is every reason to predict that this commendable small tree will achieve the representation in gardens that its ornamental merits deserve. ○

Jack Aldridge is a horticulturist at RHS Garden Wisley, with a keen interest in woody plants.

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