

Persian Ironwood

A Plant for all Seasons

March is one of those finicky times of the year. You are not certain if spring is just around the corner, or if the next impending snowstorm is about to wreck your schedule. Regardless, there are certain plants that you can depend upon for the first glimmers of spring. Among my many favorites for late winter interest, Persian Ironwood (*Parrotia persica*) is at the top of the list. It has earned this ranking not because it may have interesting flowers or foliage or form. It is at the top because it has all of these qualities!

Parrotia persica is native to the mountainous regions of Iran and Iraq. This area was originally known as Persia, hence the species name of persica. The genus epithet was derived from F. Parrot, a German naturalist. Although this plant has been in cultivation since the mid 1800's, it rarely appears in the contemporary landscape or garden. It has been classified as a small tree, although it will easily attain a height and width of over 40'. At the Rutgers Gardens there is a 50-year-old specimen that is 30+ feet tall and wide.

March into April marks the time for flowering. The flowers are very curious in appearance, since they lack petals (are apetalous) and rely upon the purple anthers for show. Although individually not overwhelming, when seen en masse on a large tree, the effect is really quite amazing. The tree assumes a purple haze. If this show were to occur in May, along with all the other denizens of the flowering trees, the tree would be overlooked. But, since it has no competition in early spring, it holds center stage!

Yet, the flowers are but a fraction of the plants merits. As the flowering fades (mid April), the leaves begin to unfurl. In most instances, the emerging glossy green leaves have a pronounced purple margin, which slowly fades to a uniform dark green for the summer. In late fall (*Parrotia* is often one of the last trees to color-up in autumn), the purple returns, along with yellows, oranges and reds for an often-spectacular fall foliage display. All the colors usually appear on the same tree and sometimes on the same leaf.

With leaf drop the tree's unusual branching pattern is unveiled. Although not exactly a contorted tree by definition, the branches twist and curve their way upward and away from the main trunk. The overall effect is that the plant is dancing! Who would not want a dancing tree in their garden? But, it gets better. As the tree ages past the 15-year mark, the outer layer of bark begins to flake off in 1-3" patches. This reveals a cream colored underbark, that provides a mottling effect for the winter experience. As the tree ages past the 25-year mark, the trunk develops a sinuous and muscular quality. This, combined with the exfoliating bark and the twisting branching pattern, provides a truly unique winter experience.

You are now thinking – a plant with so many attributes certainly must be difficult to grow. Wrong. This is an incredibly easy plant to grow. It will readily grow in average garden soil, and is very drought tolerant. It transplants easily from a container or as a

balled and burlapped (B&B) specimen. I have planted this tree on well-drained (sandy loam) hillsides that are not conducive to vigorous growth. The *Parrotia* consistently develops up to 2' of new growth, and the foliage has yet to scorch during prolonged droughts. Unlike some other fussy contenders, it will also transplant equally well as a small plant, or as a large specimen tree.

Persian Ironwood is indeed one of the more unique trees for your garden. The tree that your neighbor will never have, that is easy to grow, and that you can enjoy over the next 12 months without ever becoming bored of its chain of change!