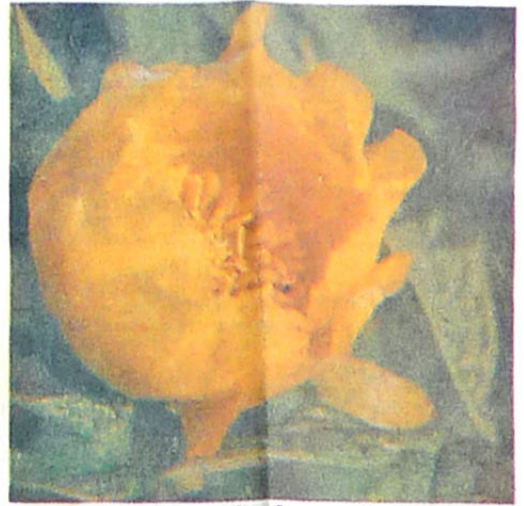


# The Flowers in our Gardens

By R. W. Sidwell.

## The crumbs that fall . . . men with a double mission



*Paeonia delavayi*. A small flowered tree peony with beautiful foliage.

Many of our plant introductions from abroad have come as sidelines to other activities. Sailors would bring back a handful of seed or perhaps a living plant along with the proverbial parrot.

The Macartney rose, (*Rosa bracteata*), was introduced to Britain during Lord Macartney's embassy in Peking 1792-94. It proved a little too tender for most parts of Britain but it was the parent of that beautiful large yellow single rose Mermaid which now graces many a south wall.

Macartney's second in command, Sir George L. Staunton, was a keen and competent botanist and gave his name to stauntonia, an interesting genus of twinning shrubs with palmate leaves.

China had long been known to have a rich store of plants but the soldiers, sailors, diplomats and traders would rarely have got beyond the gardens and nurseries near the ports and the plants introduced were often garden forms with hundreds, even thousands, of years cultivation behind them. The hinterland was rarely penetrated.

But another group of people with a different mission emerged. The Society of Jesus felt that the ancient religions of the East could do with a bit of Western Enlightenment and during the second half of the 19th

century we had a succession of French Jesuit missionaries who penetrated western China more deeply than the traders had done and among them were some highly competent botanists and naturalists.

The fashion had started a century before with Pierre d'Incarville (1706-57) who had combined his missionary work with botanical exploration and who had corresponded with the great French botanist Jussieu but the 19th century phase of this work dates from 1866 when Jean Pierre Armand David, then forty years of age, spent some seven and a half months in South Mongolia, returning to Peking for about eighteen months. His second journey, up the Yangtse River and on into the mountains of NW China occupied the period 1868-70 and covered his most important botanising work. He returned for a further spell in China 1872-74.

David recorded many plants including *Davidia involucreata* but few were introduced to cultivation. This was left to later collectors who were, however, able to take advantage of David's pioneer work.

The greatest contribution to our knowledge of the Chinese flora came from Pierre Delavay who after spending most of the period

1867-81 in the province of Kwang Tung, near the ports of Canton and Hong Kong returned home for a couple of years and then spent the 13 years 1883-96 on an intensive botanising spree in NW Yunnan, an area hitherto little known.

Delavay's industry was phenomenal, his records meticulous and his dried herbarium specimens unsurpassed in spite of the problems created by the high rainfall of the area in which he worked.

The collected material and the records were sent to Adrien Franchet, the botanist at the Museum D'histoire Naturelle, Paris. Poor Franchet was overwhelmed by the sheer mass of the work provided. During the Yunnan period, the museum received more than 200,000 specimens from Delavay. They comprised 4,000 species including 1,500 new to science. The irony of the story is that some plants first collected by Delavay but left lying in his crates untouched were subsequently discovered by other collectors who were given the credit for the first recording.

Delavay sent ripe seeds of numerous species but these were not handled well and many potential new introductions were lost.

A little more successful at introducing plants to cultivation is the last of this trio, Pierre Paul Farges. Farges collected from 1892 to 1903 and like Delavay sent much material to Franchet but he also sent ripe seed to the French nurseryman Vilmorin who, with greater horticultural skill than that of the museum staff, was successful in raising and establishing live plants.

It was the Farges/Vilmorin alliance that first brought *Davidia* to Europe and even this was a near thing. In 1897 Farges sent a parcel of 37 seeds to Vilmorin and in 1899 one germinated. It flowered for the first time in May 1906. Our own E. H. Wilson, a professional collector, later went out and collected seed by the thousand and it thus became established as a commonly planted tree.

Obviously with such a wealth of plants discovered and introduced by these workers it is impossible to mention more than a few. *Buddleia davidii*, now so commonplace was not introduced until late in the 19th century. As recently as the 1920s it was a comparatively uncommon shrub but has become almost a weed in some places with an aptitude to colonise derelict sites. It is now in the British flora as a naturalised alien.

One of my favourite mock oranges is *Philadelphus delavayi*. This makes a fairly large shrub with medium sized flowers and a perfume that is perhaps the richest of the whole genus. It is one of the plants successfully introduced to cultivation by Delavay at the time of its discovery in Yunnan in 1887.

The two tree peonies *Paeonia delavayi* with red flowers and *P. lutea*, yellow, were notable discoveries. Before then the only known tree peony was the giant flowered *P. moutan* which had been bred and cultivated in the gardens of Japan and China for centuries.

An interesting tall shrub or small tree is *Decalsnea fargesii* which has very large pinnate leaves, insignificant greenish yellow flowers and bunches of seed pods looking like

blue broad beans. The seeds in the pods are embedded in a slime, rather like tapioca pudding. I have two young specimens which, I hope, will one day fruit.

One of our most magnificent evergreen shrubs is *Magnolia delavayi*. Unfortunately it is not very hardy and can only be grown in a sheltered place. In a more favourable climate it makes a tree. Its leaves are very large and of a rich dark green.

*Osmanthus delavayi* is a smaller leaved evergreen that is completely hardy and its small white flowers in early summer are highly scented. It is one of the parents of the bigeneric hybrid *Osmarea burkwoodii*.

*Jasminum polyanthum*, now grown as a house plant was introduced by Delavay in 1883.

Herbaceous plants include many notable species. *Senecio przewalski* is named after the Russian army major who carried out extensive surveys along the Russian borders with Tibet and Mongolia. He and David seem to have discovered this plant at about the same time and in much the same area. *Astilbe davidii* is one of our finest waterside plants reaching a height of six feet under good conditions.

A plant, which I have jokingly remarked should be compulsory to all good Catholics is *Incarvillea delavayi*. Here not only is the species named after a Jesuit but the genus is also. It is a beautiful plant bearing its one-sided trumpet flowers of bright pink in the late spring on stems about a foot high. As it disappears from view completely in the winter and as the hidden crowns are so easily damaged it should be kept marked at all times.

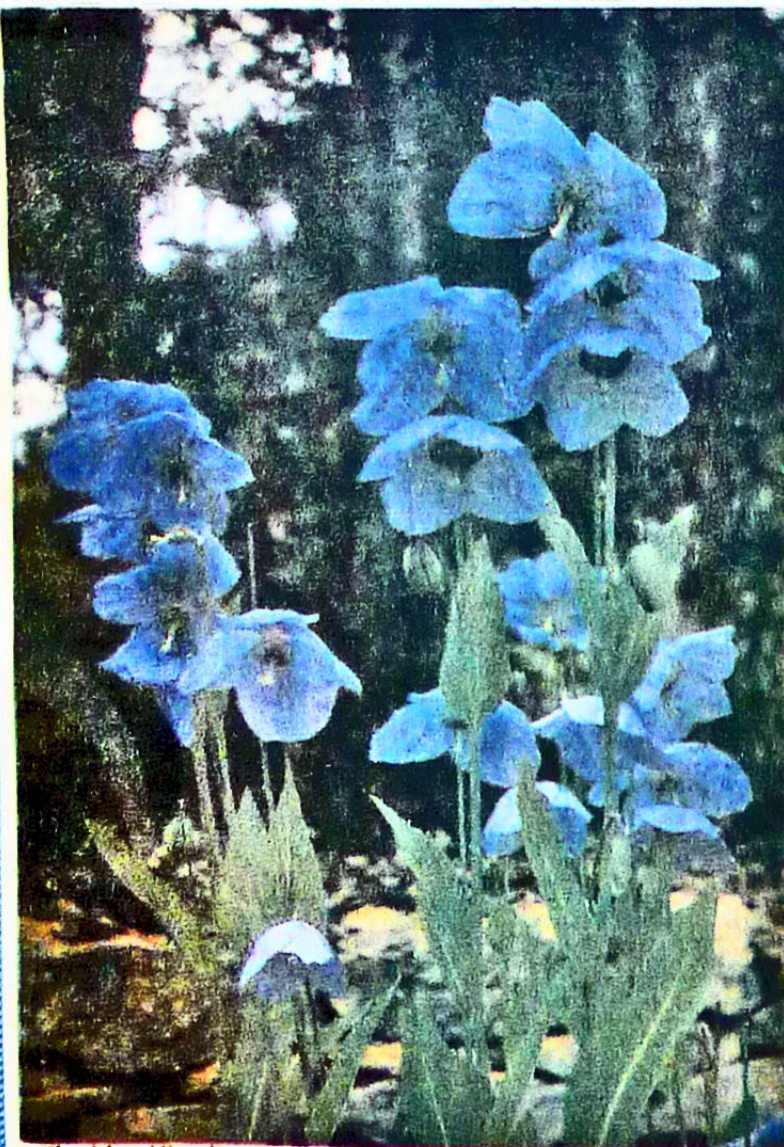
A few other noteworthy plants include *Thalictrum dipterocarpum*, *Primula malacoides*, *Podophyllum delavayi*. It is interesting to note that the blue Himalayan poppy (*Meconopsis betonicifolia*) although not introduced to Britain until 1924 was discovered by Delavay in the 1880s.

The closer one examines the work of Delavay the more remarkable it becomes. If Franchet's figures are correct he must have averaged over forty herbarium specimens per day for thirteen years. Obviously it was not a one-man job. Perhaps one reason for the excellence of the preparation of the specimens was the meticulous attention to detail of which the Chinese are capable.

The picture of Delavay that emerges as one studies his life is that of a very good man who had become part of the land of his adoption, in love with and loved by the people with whom he lived and worked. Rather like Livingstone in Africa.

Perhaps one may question whether the botanical collecting was really a side-line to the missionary work, and whether the tail wagged the dog. It is quite possible that when one is facing the true realities of life in remote areas the exact brand of religious dogma becomes less important.

I have often thought that I would like a garden devoted entirely to plants discovered by Delavay. It would be a very interesting place.



The blue Himalayan poppy was discovered by Delavay many years before its introduction into Europe.