



HIDDEN TREASURE OF THE ARBORETUM

KOREAN MAPLE

Acer pseudosieboldianum ssp. *takesimense*

TEXT & PHOTOS BY NIALL DUNNE

It's no secret that one of the best spots in our region for fall foliage is the Woodland Garden at Washington Park Arboretum. Every October, the garden's diverse collection of Japanese maples (*Acer palmatum*) orchestrates a stunning symphony of colors, causing visitors to flock here with cameras in hand.

However, aficionados of autumnal hues shouldn't just stop at the Woodland Garden! Not far to the south, in the Daniel J. Hinkley Asian Maple Collection, more delights await, such as the orange- to rose-red-foliaged Manchurian maple (*Acer mandshuricum*) and the blood-red painted maple (*Acer* aff. *pictum*).

Along the lower Lookout Loop trail, connecting the Woodland Garden to the Asian Maple Collection, is an absolute must-see: the Korean maple, currently tagged *Acer takesimense*. When I came across it late last October, the tree's rounded, nine- to eleven-lobed leaves

were ablaze with yellows, oranges and reds. Some were edged or shot through with purple. The 20-foot tree also had a pleasing, upright form with a relatively narrow canopy. (Calling all small-tree-for-small-gardens enthusiasts!)

Having photographed the accession tag and found the historic record card for the tree on the UW Botanic Gardens interactive map (<https://depts.washington.edu/uwbg/gardens/map.shtml>), I was excited to discover that its seed was collected in South Korea in the fall of 1982 by then Arboretum plant curator Joe Witt, for whom our iconic Winter Garden is named.

A Rare Endemic

I got in touch with our current plant curator, Ray Larson, and he informed me that this maple is now generally classified as a subspecies of *Acer pseudosieboldianum*, which is widely distributed in Northeast Asia, including Korea. The



The summer foliage.

subspecies *takesimensis* is a rare endemic native to Ulleungdo, a small island about 75 miles east of the Korean Peninsula.

The seed Joe brought back from the island was propagated, and eventually three young trees were planted close together out in the Arboretum in 1994. Sadly, one of the specimens (accession 210-82B) succumbed to verticillium wilt in 2001 and was removed. The third specimen (210-82C) is still alive and grows about a dozen feet from the specimen that first caught my eye (210-82A).

“Interestingly, C is quite a bit smaller than A,” said Ray, “but it is unclear if this is a dwarf form from seed or just less vigorous due to soil or root conditions.” Though the plants are the same age, C is only about eight feet tall and looks quite shrubby.

Ray thought there was some mention of Joe’s trip to Korea in old issues of the “Arboretum Bulletin.” I checked and, sure enough, Joe wrote a detailed and fascinating account of his plant tour in the spring and summer issues of the 1983 “Bulletin.” (You can read them online in the Biodiversity Heritage Library’s archive of our magazine at www.biodiversitylibrary.org/bibliography/139633#/summary.)

A Curator’s Curiosity

He even describes finding the maple and collecting the seeds near Dodong, the main town on Ulleungdo.

“The port city of Pohang on the East or Japanese Sea was our next stop after a short drive from Kyongju. We stayed only long enough to



The fall foliage.

board the steamer No. 1 Hanil Ho for a six-hour trip to the island of Ullung. This volcanic island rises sharply from the sea some 270 kilometers east of Pohang and is the home of a number of endemic plants we hoped to see.”

“...Ullung-do viewed from the sea is most spectacular. Green-clad slopes, rising steeply from blue water, are dramatically cut with deep canyons and often topped with pinnacles of rock. Somehow small farms manage to cling to the less-steep slopes, and fishing villages are tucked into any protected inlet.”

“... [We] spent the afternoon exploring around Dodong. The village is the center of a cuttlefish industry and many of the roof tops had drying racks for these small squid relatives. Needless to say, drying cuttlefish has a most obvious aroma and one which saturates the air. The road we took climbed up from the quay to a semi-wild area several hundred feet above. There we found two endemic maples, *Acer takesimensis* and *A. okamotoanum*. Both were in fruit, which we collected for the Arboretum.”

Exceptional Foliage, Form and Winter Hardiness

I couldn't quite pin down the origin of the name “takesimensis.” One source said that it comes from “Takeshima,” the Japanese name for Ulleungdo during the Edo period (1603–1863). Another possibility is that the name derives from the Liancourt Rocks, a group of tiny islands about 60 sixty miles southeast of Ulleungdo that Japan now refers to as Takeshima. A disputed territory between South Korea and Japan, it shares at least

one endemic species (*Sedum takesimensis*) with Ulleungdo, though not the maple.

Acer pseudosieboldianum ssp. *takesimensis* shares some characteristics with the straight species (*A. pseudosieboldianum* ssp. *pseudosieboldianum*) on the mainland: They both grow up to 25 feet tall, bear purple and white flowers in spring, have dark-green summer foliage, and are very winter hardy (to USDA Zone 4). However, the Ulleungdo endemic's isolation has led to the evolution of distinct features—ones that some feel make it a more garden-worthy tree.

The website of the International Dendrology Society (<https://treesandshrubsonline.org>) says *takesimensis* has a tighter, more elegant form and smaller (two-to-four inches wide), rounder, more beautiful leaves. “It is an exceptionally attractive tree and, unlike the nominate subspecies, can hold its own amongst the familiar Japanese species, with leaves that are almost circular if traced around the points of their numerous lobes.”

The tree is easily grown in moist, organically rich, well-drained soils in full sun to part shade. Some of the larger nurseries in the U.S. do sometimes offer it for sale online. If, like Joe Witt, you're curious about the species, make a trip to the Arboretum and see the product of his peregrinations. ♡

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