



The stunning fall foliage.

# Japanese Rowan

BY NIALL DUNNE

Last year was a banner year for fall color, and I took a lot of photos in the Arboretum. One of the most striking foliage displays I encountered was on a small Japanese rowan (*Sorbus commixta*) in the Brian Mulligan Sorbus Collection. It was mid-October, and the glossy, fern-like foliage of the young tree was turning from green to a gorgeous mix of orange-red and deep purple. Later, I looked through my photo archives and found that (over the years) I had photographed the same plant in flower and fruit—and I liked what I saw.



Creamy white flower clusters in May.



Maturing fruit in summer.

## FABULOUS IN ALL SEASONS

*Sorbus commixta* is a deciduous shrub or small tree in the rose family (Rosaceae) native to mountain forests in Japan, Korea and the Russian Far East. The plant's form (and other features) can vary considerably over its native range, but generally it starts out somewhat columnar and matures into a broader, more rounded tree between 20 and 30 feet high. The compound leaves grow up to a foot long and consist of between 13 and 17 sharply pointed leaflets, with serrated edges arrayed on either side of a central stalk. In autumn, the foliage turns yellow to purplish red. "The Hillier Manual of Trees & Shrubs" (David and Charles, 1996) says Japanese rowan is one of the best *Sorbus* for fall color.

It also has handsome, big blooms and colorful, berry-like fruits. Around mid-May, small, five-petaled, creamy-white flowers are held in six-inch-wide, flat-topped clusters above the foliage. These develop into large, erect bunches of small, red to orange-red (sometimes yellow) fruits. The fruits persist until late in the season and provide a banquet for birds. The smooth, silvery-gray bark also is decorative and becomes fissured as the tree reaches old age.

The ethnobotany of *Sorbus commixta* is interesting. Traditionally, the fruits have been eaten as food, and have also been used medicinally as a gargle for sore throats and a laxative. The cortex of the plant has been used to treat bronchitis, gastritis and dropsy. Researchers in Korea have recently been exploring the plant's biological activity and its potential for treating inflammation and certain types of cancer. Do note, however, that the seeds contain hydrogen cyanide, which can be harmful if consumed in excess.

## ARBORETUM HISTORICAL RECORD

The tree I photographed in the Arboretum last fall was a gift from Dan Hinkley and Heronswood Nursery. Dan gave it to us as a seed in 1994, and it was planted out in 1998, originally in the north corner of the Visitors Center parking lot. In 1999, the specimen was moved to the middle of the Sorbus Collection, located on the east side of Arboretum Drive, just across from the Magnolia Collection.

When I researched this article, I found out that there are actually 10 specimens of Japanese rowan in the Sorbus Collection—and their historical records provide a wonderful example of the collaborative work done by public gardens around the world. The oldest dates back to 1945 and came to us from the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, Scotland. Other specimens, dating to the 1950s, came from the Essen Botanical Garden, Germany; the Arboretum in Wageningen, Holland; the Hortus Botanicus in Poznań, Poland; and the Experimental Forest Station, at Kyoto University, in Kyoto, Japan.

Many of these specimens had been planted in various spots around the Arboretum and were then consolidated into the Sorbus area when that collection was renovated in the late 1980s. (The collection was dedicated to former Arboretum director—and *Sorbus* enthusiast—Brian Mulligan in the summer of 1990.)

I became curious as to why—with such a great variety of species in the Arboretum's Sorbus Collection—Japanese rowan is so numerically dominant. Was it Brian's favorite? I asked UW Botanic Gardens' Curator of Living Collections Ray Larson if he could shed any light.

### VARIATION: THE SPICE OF PLANT LIFE

“As to why *Sorbus commixta* is so well-represented in the collection,” says Ray, “I would surmise that it is for a few reasons. One is because the species is a rather variable tree in terms of berry color, with forms selected for yellowish to orange to bright-red fruit, and gradations in between. Second is the fact that it is a generally a smaller, more compact tree than many others in the genus. This makes it a great tree for small- to medium-sized gardens, and allows us at the Arboretum to showcase a lot of variety within a relatively small space. Third, it really is one of the better species in terms of overall effect, from size to berry color to fall foliage.”

“Another reason we have so many,” continues Ray, “is that several of the plants we received over the years originally came with different names attached but were later reclassified as *Sorbus commixta*. *Sorbus* was of special interest to Brian Mulligan, and he was very much on top of the nomenclature and literature on the genus.”

Variation is strong within this species—so much so that it’s captured in the species name, *commixta*, which is Latin for “mixed together.” And where there’s variation, there can be taxonomic confusion and disagreement. In his

“North American Landscape Trees” (Ten Speed Press, 1996), Arthur Lee Jacobson writes “[The tree] is variable, and its name *commixta* likely refers to the consternation of botanists attempting to delineate its proper place in the cosmos.”

I’ll be heading out to the Sorbus Collection again with my camera this fall to see if I can capture some of that variation. I’m curious about a yellow-fruiting variety of *S. commixta* that Brian Mulligan donated from his home garden in Kirkland, in 1990. (The seed of the plant originally came from a nursery in Aviemore, Scotland, in the early 1970s.) Situated at the north end of the collection, it doesn’t have any special cultivar name, but I’m betting it’s a pretty special plant. 🍷

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### GROWING TIPS

Most *Sorbus* thrive in the maritime Pacific Northwest, and Japanese rowan is no exception. It does best in moist, well-drained, acid-to-neutral soil, in full sun or light, dappled shade. Propagation is done by sowing seed in containers in a cold frame in fall or by taking cuttings in early summer.

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