The first time I encountered *Sorbus setschwanensis* (or Sichuan mountain ash) growing in the Washington Park Arboretum, I would not have guessed that this was a close cousin of our more familiar mountain ashes from North America and Europe. Like our native *Sorbus sitchensis*, this arching, multi-stemmed plant lives in the gray area between tree and shrub, with a full height of around 12 to 15 feet and a slightly smaller spread. But unlike many other plants that share this habit, Sichuan mountain ash bears foliage that’s quite elegant in form. The tiny, tightly pinnate leaves and slender branches create an exotic, ferny texture. Although this plant is deciduous, one might not guess that when viewing its dark, waxy summer foliage. The subtle, white flowers in May, and the white fruits that follow, will be more familiar to *Sorbus* lovers. Fall color is variable—from copper to crimson—and can be dramatic under ideal conditions.

Besides its noteworthy foliage, the most interesting thing about this plant might be its place of origin. It is a common joke among plant lovers that if one is asked about the origins of a plant species and one isn’t sure of the answer, a reply of “Western China” will be correct about half the time. A great number of the common landscape plants we see around us in the Pacific Northwest—and indeed in most of the temperate world—are descendants of plants collected in the late 19th and early 20th centuries by botanical explorers working in Sichuan and other highland areas in Western China. Along with endemics like dove tree (*Davidia involucrata*), these include the parents of many
of the magnolia, viburnum, hydrangea and spiraea varieties common in nurseries, as well as the ancestors of many of our rhododendron and rose hybrids. China alone has three to four times the botanical diversity of all of North America, with a particular hot spot occurring in Sichuan and other surrounding mountain regions.

Sichuan lies along the 30th parallel, roughly the same distance from the Equator as Egypt, northern Florida and Morocco. Its incredible biodiversity can be attributed to its subtropical climate in the lowlands being interrupted by high mountain ranges, divided by deep gorges. These mountains and valleys create microclimates that might feel like Florida at the valley floor, Denmark halfway up, and Siberia near the ridgetops. The area was also spared inundation by the most recent Ice Age, an event that caused plant diversity to plummet in much of Europe and North America.

A German botanical explorer named C.K. Schneider first brought *Sorbus setschwanensis* seeds back to Europe in 1915, but the plant has since remained rare in cultivation. The four specimens in the Arboretum were derived from seed collected by our own modern Northwest plant explorer Dan Hinkley in 2008 at the Labahe Nature Reserve in Sichuan, China, where the plant shares its home with the world’s most significant population of red pandas.

Mountain ashes are not closely related to *Fraxinus*, the true ashes, but have been labeled as such due to having similar compound leaves. The differing flowers, fruits and leaf arrangement (*Sorbus* are alternate and *Fraxinus* are opposite) make the two genera easily distinguishable on further inspection. In Europe and eastern North America, *Sorbus* are also called rowan trees, and both “sorbus” (from the Latin) and “rowan” (from the North Germanic) are words referring to the red color of the fruits in those species. However, they are misnomers when applied to the entire genus: A quick visit to the Brian Mulligan Sorbus Collection at the Arboretum in fall reveals that the fruit color runs almost the entire spectrum. You’ll even see several species from Asia that, like *S. setschwanensis*, boast attractive white fruits, including *S. forrestii*, *S. cashmiriana* and *S. prattii*.

Sichuan mountain ash is relatively untested in gardens and not widely available in the nursery trade. Like other *Sorbus*, it appears to do well in full sun to partial shade and well-drained soil. It also seems to appreciate some summer water in our climate. Its dense, textural quality suggests it would work well as a background or screening plant, but the “first encounter” specimen I referred to in the Arboretum stands very well by itself. You’ll find it at the intersection of the New Zealand Forest path and the Ridgetop Trail, growing next to a beautiful specimen of *Hydrangea longipes*, also from Sichuan. Two of the other Hinkley specimens grow on the western edge of the main Sorbus Collection, by the small parking area across Arboretum Drive from the Magnolia Collection. The fourth specimen grows along the Arboretum Loop Trail in the future China Forest.

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