

*The Plantsman's Choice*  
Presenting promising urban trees

# Persian ironwood

## An exotic urban tree for the future

Henrik Sjöman and Andrew Hiron



The early  
spring flowers.  
(Henrik Sjöman)

*Parrotia persica* (commonly called Persian ironwood) is a deciduous tree, closely related to the witch-hazel genus *Hamamelis* and placed in the family Hamamelidaceae. It is native to northern Iran and south-east Azerbaijan. In the Caspian mountain forests it grows at altitudes between 100m and 1,000m above sea level, while in the eastern Caucasus it is found between 800m and 1,400m. In cool and humid environments, such as those found on the north-facing slopes of mountains, it can reach 25m in height. However, it has highly variable form throughout its range which makes describing a 'typical' mature specimen quite challenging.

It may appear as a large shrub or shrub-tree, with branches that are somewhat horizontal or even angled downwards, causing the lower branches to reach the ground. This feature of growth creates almost impenetrable thickets in the Persian ironwood's natural habitats. The species also occurs as trees with very clear upward growth. As young trees they present a columnar form but their crown invariably broadens with age. Really large trees of the species, found in the warm, temperate regions of Europe, even resemble a mature open-grown oak. If you choose the pure species of Persian ironwood it may be a bit like a lottery: you may get an individual plant intent on becoming a large shrub, or one that wants to become a tree. For this reason, a variety of cultivars of known habit are now available in many nurseries.

The great value of Persian ironwood is the beautiful leaves that are a lustrous green in the summer before becoming painted in autumn with an outstandingly beautiful mix of greens, yellows, reds and purples. However, autumn colours can vary from year to year on the same plant: the best colours appear after a hot summer or in a warm microclimate.

As with many other species from the witch-hazel (*Hamamelis* spp.) family, flowering occurs in late winter to early spring. The purple flowers are subtle from afar but certainly warrant a close inspection as they are really rather attractive. Older trees also



The autumn colours of the Persian ironwood are outstandingly beautiful with a mix of green, yellow, red and purple. (Henrik Sjöman)



A free growing Persian ironwood (*Parrotia persica*) at New York Botanical Garden. (Henrik Sjöman)

develop beautiful trunks as the outer bark flakes off in irregular plates, leaving a beautiful mosaic of yellow, red, purple and green.

Although the Persian ironwood grows naturally in a mild climate with a warm and long summer, the species has a surprisingly good cold-hardiness. In colder climates larger nursery stock should be procured as they have a better cold-hardiness than younger plant material. As its natural range would suggest, the species favours warm environments so provides an excellent choice for warm inner-city planting sites. In contrast to the majority of witch-hazels, the Persian ironwood is highly tolerant of sites with neutral to alkaline soils. It is proven to have good tolerance for dry conditions but inevitably will develop more effectively where soil moisture is plentiful.

The cultivar 'Vanessa' (syn. 'Select') is a tree-growing variety that develops a more or less upright trunk. Its side branches also have a clear upward angle, giving the tree a narrow ovoid to columnar habit, 6–10m high and 2–4m wide. As with the more shrubby forms, 'Vanessa' is clothed in beautiful dark green leaves during summer before the autumnal hues emerge later in the year. Without doubt, Persian ironwood is a

worthy candidate for a wide range of amenity scenarios and a particularly good candidate where space for broad-crowned trees is limited. It is still relatively rare in Sweden and the UK in public plantations but has proved tolerant of a range of urban sites in the United States, Germany and the Netherlands.



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ARB Magazine readers may remember that Rhod Taylor, Curator of the Lovell Quinta Arboretum, is also an advocate of *Parrotia persica*. You can read his article in issue 156 (spring 2012).