

Tree of the Month, November 2013: Mountain ash (*Sorbus hupehensis* 'Pink Pagoda')

The mountain ash cultivar 'Pink Pagoda' was named and introduced to cultivation by UBC Botanical Garden in 1988. The original seedling was grown at Gayborder Nursery near Victoria, BC. Because of its beautiful pinnate foliage, which changes from blue-green to red in the fall, and pink berries that last long into the winter, 'Pink Pagoda' has gained a reputation as an excellent cultivar and has won a Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) Award of Garden Merit.

Sorbus hupehensis was first described and introduced to cultivation by Ernest H. Wilson, the famous English plant collector. He found the tree in the Chinese province known today as Hubei, but in the early 1900's when Wilson was collecting it was spelled Hupeh, hence the specific epithet, *hupehensis*. The tree that Wilson found had white fruit; 'Pink Pagoda' is a pink-fruited form.

Sorbus are confusing for taxonomists to classify because they can easily hybridize with other species of *Sorbus* and even other genera within the rose family. Some *Sorbus* only reproduce sexually, and must be fertilized with pollen from another tree or with pollen from their own flowers. Some are apomictic – meaning they can produce viable seed without any fertilization, and any seedlings that grow from their berries will be clones. *Sorbus* are also quite variable in terms of their morphology. An apomictic tree with unusual foliage or berries can create unique little populations of identical clones that can mislead botanists into thinking they have discovered an entirely new species. It is now thought that the *Sorbus hupehensis* that Wilson discovered was just a variation of *Sorbus discolor*, and not a separate species at all. This means that *Sorbus hupehensis* is not a valid name, and so the cultivar is often referred to as *Sorbus* 'Pink Pagoda' to simplify matters.

Birds are fond of *Sorbus* trees. Robins and thrushes eat the berries in late winter, although if they wait too long the berries may start to ferment; there are reports of crowds of drunken songbirds flying into windows after filling up on alcohol-filled *Sorbus* berries. The tiny white flowers have very sugary nectar and hummingbirds love them. At VanDusen, male hummingbirds claim the *Sorbus* trees as their feeding territory, and can often be seen perched in a *Sorbus* singing or defending their trees from other hummingbirds who try to drink the nectar. Many *Sorbus* flowers are insect-pollinated, and may have a slightly fishy odour to attract flies and other meat-loving insects.