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A Chinese Discovery:

Viburnum Fragens

My account of the discovery, in Western China, at the end of the last century, of that superlative tree *Davidia involucrata*—the Handkerchief Tree— attracted so much attention that for some time past I have been tempted to recall how another very beautiful tree was discovered, also in China, some fifteen years later



By H.E. Bates

of the Da Tung Alps, in cottage gardens in 'so high and cold a situation of that cold bleak region that even corn will not ripen there, except perhaps in one season out of three.'

All this rightly induced Farrer to foretell that the viburnum would surely be perfectly hardy in Britain, which it most certainly is. 'May it soon yield us the secular glory of the superb bushes that it makes in the yards of the Prince of Jorini or the great Green Temple at Lanchou—gracious arching masses, ten feet high and more across, whose

naked boughs in spring, before the foliage, become one blaze of soft pink spikelets, breathing an intense fragrance of heliotrope.

'The white form, indeed, is pure and long as the best of forced white lilac, but my heart goes out yet more specially perhaps to the enormous commoner pink type, whose blushing stars glisten as if built of crystals, after the pleasant fashion of so many spring flowers, which is shared only, among summer ones, by the gross fleshiness of begonias.

'Nor when the flowers are gone and the delicate foliage developed, is the work of the viburnum finished. For now appear the glowing glossy scarlet fruits, hanging all over the bush in pendant clusters of jewel work; these you eat with avidity and good result, as long as you remember to throw away the unwholesome kernel.'

I have now been growing *Viburnum fragrans* for forty years but I have never yet seen the pure white variety, nor have I ever been tempted to eat the fruits. What I have done, however, is to note an odd change in the habit of this delightful tree.

When I first grew it its flowering period lasted from about December almost into April. But over the past few years for some inexplicable reason, it has begun to flower much earlier, often as early as mid-October, its full flush coming in November or December. As a result its flowering season is virtually finished by early January when only a few sparse blossoms remain. I can offer no explanation for this. Nor do I know if other gardeners have had the same experience. It may simply be that the change of habit is peculiar to my own garden.

This is a good moment to mention that there is now an improved variety of *Viburnum fragrans*, offered under the name of *Viburnum bodnantense* Dawn. This not only has much longer flowers than the other type but also has the added virtue of flowering, as this type used to, over a longer period. It is most certainly a worthy addition to an already excellent and highly-rewarding family.

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I refer to *Viburnum fragrans*, one of the most delightful of an attractive family and without doubt one of the most precious of winter-flowering things, with its clusters of white tubular-shaped flowers, tinged pink in bud.

It was in February 1914 that an expedition to China long dreamed of by Reginald Farrer at last got under way, its object being to explore the remote northerly province of the Kansu-Tibet border from north to south. This distant and primitive area was specifically chosen 'in the hope of finding its flora more resistant and useful in the British climate than the softer productions of Yunnan and Szechwan' and also because the 'southern border provinces have been, and are still being, worked by English horticultural collectors such as Ward and Forrest, whereas the Kansu March remained a perfectly virgin field.'

'Virgin' hardly describes it. For all the wild beauty of its mountains and valleys, crowded as they were with masses of wild apricot and plum blossom, the place was pretty fearsome, the inns being bug ridden, the landlords uncivil and food hard to come by. Nevertheless, on 16th April of that year a piece of botanical history was made.

For years *Viburnum fragrans* had been one of the best known and best loved of all garden plants all over Northern China. What wasn't known was whether the plant was truly indigenous—native to that place—or if not where its place of origin might be. It was Farrer's hope that somewhere during that remote expedition he would find out.

On 16th April his hopes were realised. For the first time he began to see the viburnum in its wild state, at first only in small and isolated quantities 'but soon in such quantity and such situations that one could no longer doubt that here this most glorious of flowering shrubs was truly indigenous.'

Not only was this discovery highly satisfying in itself; it was supplemented some time later when Farrer saw the viburnum in full glory at the very feet