

## *Sorbus filipes* Hugh McAllister\*

Though named in 1933 by Handel-Mazzetti and collected numerous times by George Forrest, *Sorbus filipes* does not seem to have been introduced to cultivation until recently (1985), since when several expeditions and individual collectors have brought back seed or scions. Forrest's herbarium specimens suggest a delicate, very striking and attractive species with large crimson flowers and minute, deeply toothed leaflets. In the living state it is perhaps not quite so appealing as the flowers are rather sparse and short-lived and tend to hang down and be hidden among the leaves. However, the small, glossy leaflets, crimson-pink flowers and large white fruit make this an attractive shrub or small tree for gardens in suitable climates. The fruits seem to be relatively unattractive to birds and so remain on the shrubs for at least several weeks after the leaves have fallen.

Compared with the commonly grown orange-red fruited species and those species related to *S. hupehensis* which are easy to grow in a wide range of climates, *S. filipes* is slower growing and seems to require moist conditions and possibly a humus-rich soil to thrive and perform well as a garden plant. Like all *Sorbus* it is only likely to flower and fruit well in full sun though from limited experience so far in cultivation this species may do better than most in light shade. Though I usually recommend growing *Sorbus* on their own roots, in less than favourable climates it might be best to grow *S. filipes* on an *S. aucuparia* rootstock. Trees in the wild may reach 3-4 m, but in cultivation seedlings will flower in their third year when only 30cm tall.

Like the majority of the cultivated white-crimson fruited rowans, *S. filipes* is apomictic with asexual production of seed so that seedlings are as true to the parent as vegetatively propagated plants. This means that seed offers an easy method of propagation without the need to maintain a breeding population as with self-incompatible species. Like most temperate woody species, seeds of *S. filipes* require a cold period before they will germinate so should be sown in autumn outside or cold treated in a fridge at around 1°C and left there until they germinate before pricking out.

Seed of the plant from which the photograph was taken (see opposite) was collected by James Compton, John d'Arcy and Martyn Rix in western China in 1995 (C.D.& R. 2278). It was growing at around 3600m in an area of degraded *Abies* forest at Napa Hai, near Zhongdian in NW Yunnan. The soil was shallow and peaty over limestone rubble, but the area has a high summer rainfall.

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\*Hugh McAllister's new monograph of the Mountain Ashes, *Sorbus* sect. *Aucuparia*, will be published by The Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew in September. He is a botanist and cytotaxonomist at the University of Liverpool, specialising in *Betula*, *Sorbus*, *Cotoneaster*, *Hedera* and *Rhododendron*, and has been, for many years, closely connected with the Botanic Garden at Ness.



Above: *Sorbus filipes*, collected in Yunnan and now growing in North Devon  
Below: Habitat of *S. filipes* near Zhongdian, W China; regeneration of the shrub layer after the conifers have been felled

photographs © Martyn Rix

