
‘The Pride of Burma’

In the first of an occasional series of articles on tree species thought to be extinct in the wild, **CAROL GURNEY** introduces *Amherstia nobilis* (Fabaceae), which is spectacular in flower.

This tree, endemic originally in Burma, has been described as the ‘loveliest tree in the world’. On the IDS Tour to Burma in November 2006, a few of us who got up early on the last day of the Tour were lucky enough to see it in flower in a garden in Rangoon. This tree was about 10m high.

It was discovered in 1827 by Dr Wallich in a temple on the Salween river and is named after Lady Amherst, the wife of the British Governor General. Inevitably its renown led to a scramble to get a plant back to Europe and a young gardener, John Gibson at Chatsworth, was sent by the Duke of Devonshire to get it. Sadly his cuttings died but the Duke

was determined to acquire it and in 1839 he got cuttings from the East India Company. These were planted at Chatsworth in a special ‘Amherstia house’.

In 1849 a tree flowered in Ealing where it was being grown by a Mrs Lawrence. The Duke no doubt was rather cross as his did not flower until some years later.

It was not in fact discovered in the wild until the Reverend Parish found one tree on a steep bank above a tributary of the Salween in 1865.

A tree is recorded as flowering at Kew in April 1865 and indeed there is still a tree in the Palm House which flowers in late spring most years. It seems that it was very rare indeed in the wild even 200 years ago, but there remain a number of trees in cultivation mostly in south east Asia.

Reference

Colquhoun, K. 2008. Dressed to impress. Kew, Spring, pp. 48-49

Lyte, B (2003) *Amherstia nobilis*, Plants in Peril. *Curtis's Botanical Magazine* Vol. 20 pt 3 pp.172-176



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Amherstia nobilis, flowering in the Bangalore Botanic Garden.