Paja—An Autumn-flowering Wild Cherry

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Paja (*Prunus cerasoides* var. *majestica* Ingram) is a wild tree occurring in the forests and wastelands throughout the temperate Himalayan region extending from Kashmir to Bhutan. It grows between 1100 and 2300 m above sea level. The usual minimum temperature prevailing in this region is -5 to -7°C. Most English authors on Himalayan plants refer to paja by the name wild cherry.

Paja has a unique flowering behavior. Instead of flowering during the spring months, when its relatives are blooming, paja flowers during autumn. The pink flowers of this wild-growing plant are very attractive. Individual trees exhibit variation in the depth of pink color of the flowers. The blooming season lasts ≈ 4 weeks. Genetic variability among the wild seedlings may cause the flowering time to vary by up to 15 days.

Paja was a commonly used rootstock for sweet cherry (*P. avium* L.) during the last several decades (Bajwa et al., 1959). Its use as a rootstock has now been discontinued because of the occurrence of delayed incompatibility.

The fruits of paja ripen from April to May. These are not edible but are used to make a

cherry brandy. The kernel of this fruit is used as a remedy for kidney stones (Council of Sci. and Indust. Res., 1969). The wood is sturdy and durable and is used for making ornamental furniture, walking sticks, and handles for farm implements (Pearson and Brown, 1932).

Origin

There is no authentic report on paja regarding its origin. It commonly grows wild in the forests of the temperate Himalayan region and likely originated in the sub-Himalayan region.

Description

Trees are evergreen, upright, 10 to 15 m high, with a spread of 4 to 5 m. Bark is tight, brown (200-A) (Royal Horticultural Society, 1966), and glabrous. Branches are erect, bark is tight and gray, and growing shoots are round, grayish-green (191-C), and glabrous. Internode length is 1.56 to 2.50 cm.

Leaves are elliptical, apex acuminate, margin serrate, green (138-A), midrib and veins conspicuous, ≈ 6.3 cm long, 3.0 cm wide; petioles are angular and 1.20 to 1.45

Fig. 1. Paja flowers.

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Fig. 2. Paja fruits at maturity.

Fig. 3. Paja in bloom.

cm long, glabrous, and reddish tinged, with stipules present.

Flower buds are lateral, with two to five flowers per cluster, deep to light pink, diameter 3.1 to 3.3 cm (Fig. 1). Petioles are 1.2 to 1.3 cm long, 0.9 to 1.0 cm wide, and pedicels are 1.3 to 1.7 cm long, green (13% A), and glabrous. Stamens, 30 to 35 arranged in calyx cup, are red purple (61-A).

Fruit are oblong or ellipsoid, obtuse, flesh scanty, yellow to reddish (Fig. 2). Stones are oval, 0.92 to 0.95 cm long, 0.73 to 0.76 cm wide, and weigh $\approx$ 204 mg.

Bearing is normal, even by isolated trees, indicating that paja is self-fruitful.

Suggested use

Paja possesses some exclusive traits not found in its relatives. Trees flower at a time when all other species of *Prunus* are either dormant or approaching dormancy. The flowers are very attractive (Fig. 3). The flowering period is $\approx$ 4 weeks. A few trees of paja in any garden will create spring during autumn. It can, therefore, be a useful ornamental flowering tree for planting in parks, gardens, and along highways.

Besides its use as an ornamental flowering tree, it can also be used as multipurpose tree species in tree-planting programs.

Availability

Small quantities of paja seed can be obtained from C.P. for trial. The seeds require moist stratification at 2 to 5C for $\approx$ 6 weeks for proper germination.

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