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Lilac and horse-chestnut: discovery and rediscovery

Abstract

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The discovery of the lilac (*Syringa vulgaris* L.) and the horse-chestnut (*Aesculus hippocastanum* L.) in the sixteenth century are briefly described as is the sequence of events which lead in the late eighteenth century to their discovery in the wild - of the lilac in modern Bulgaria, of the horse-chestnut in modern Greece.

Introduction

Contrary to wide-spread opinion neither the lilac (*Syringa vulgaris* L.) nor the horse-chestnut (*Aesculus hippocastanum* L.) are native in Central and western Europe, but occur naturally only on the Balkan peninsula, with the lilac being found also in a clearly circumscribed area north of the Danube River in modern Rumania (Fig.1). This paper summarizes early reports on these two ornamental plants and their introduction into cultivation, comments on the loss of information about their native habitats, and describes the rediscovery of the lilac in 1794 in modern Bulgaria, and of the horse-chestnut in 1795 in modern Greece.

A more detailed account is currently in press in *Curtis's Botanical Magazine* (Lack 2000), which contains several early illustrations of these two plants, both of great horticultural importance; the general background of the rediscovery of the lilac and the horse-chestnut has recently been provided (Lack 1998).

Discovery

Willem Quackelbeen (1527 - 1561), physician of Aughier Ghislain de Busbecq, then 'orator' [ambassador] of Emperor Ferdinand I at the court of Sultan Süleyman II in Istanbul, seems to have been the first to report on the horse-chestnut, mentioning it briefly in one of his letters. The first printed illustration of this tree was published in Prague in 1563 (Mattioli 1563), said to be based on material received from Busbecq - either a specimen or a drawing. Living material has been cultivated very early at Florence, Padova, Bologna, and Pisa (Lack 2000), but the best documented case for introduction is provided by the seeds sent by David Ungnad, Graf von Weissenfels, one of Busbecq's successors at



Fig. 1. Natural distribution of *Syringa vulgaris* L. and *Aesculus hippocastanum* L.; based on Jakucs (1959) and Horvat, Glavac & Ellenberg (1974), with modifications mainly taken from Boratynski, Browicz & Zieliński (1992) and Davis (1965-1985).

the High Porte (Clusius 1583). In 1581 they were successfully raised by Carolus Clusius in Vienna, almost certainly originating from specimens cultivated in Istanbul (Clusius 1583).

Three very old drawings of the lilac are known to exist - kept in Erlangen, Venice and Bologna, all three possibly based on specimens cultivated in Florence, Vicenza and

Bologna respectively (Lack 2000). At least the Erlangen drawing must be older than the first printed illustration of *Syringa vulgaris* L., i. e. that published by Mattioli in Venice in 1565 (Mattioli 1565); the latter seems to have been also based on a drawing received from Busbecq. It is quite possible that all early introductions of the lilac into central Europe have their origin in material cultivated in Istanbul (Lack 2000).

While both species were quickly distributed all over Europe, knowledge on their native habitat was soon lost, with e. g. Linnaeus giving in his 'Species plantarum' (Linnaeus 1753) for the lilac 'Habitat versus Persiam' and for the horse-chestnut even 'Habitat in Asia septentrionaliore', being preceded and followed by many other authors.

Rediscovery

It was only in the late eighteenth century that natural stands of the lilac and the horse-chestnut were discovered.

John Sibthorp (1758 - 1796), fourth Sherardian Professor of Botany at the University of Oxford, found the lilac in its native habitat in May 1794. When crossing the Eminska Planina in modern Bulgaria on his way from Ruse to Istanbul he noted in his diary, 'From the rock hanging over the torrent bed we gath'd specimens of lilac syringa vulgaris now in full flower' (Sibthorp cited in Tappe 1967). This finding is corroborated by a specimen kept today among the 'Dacian Plants' in the Sibthorpien Herbarium at the Department of Plant Sciences, University of Oxford (Lack 1998). A further report is found in Sibthorp's first letter from Istanbul to his friend John Hawkins (1761 - 1841), then travelling from Crete to the capital of the Ottoman Empire (Hope 1974, Lack 1998). When publishing his 'Florae Graecae Prodromus' (Sibthorp & Smith 1806 - 1816) James Edward Smith deliberately suppressed all information on the materials collected by Sibthorp on his way from Vienna to Istanbul via Bucharest (Lack 1998). Thus it is no surprise, that so far Anton Rochel has been credited as having discovered the lilac in the wild (Fiala 1928).

Only one year after Sibthorp, Hawkins discovered natural stands of the horse-chestnut, but in contrast to him he did not collect a specimen, and only his report is included in Smith's 'Prodromus' (Lack 1998). Since Hawkins's diaries are lost with only the letters and his much later publications being available, it is impossible to state the locality with precision (Lack 1998). However, the information given in the 'Prodromus', i. e. 'in Pindo et Pilio montibus', is probably correct.

Hard to believe, but true, the botanical community did not believe in Hawkins's finding, and many continued to believe the horse-chestnut to be native in areas much further east. It took more than eighty years until Theodor von Heldreich reported on the occurrence of this spectacular tree in the Pindos Mountains (Heldreich 1880), thereby confirming Hawkins's much earlier find.

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