

# Kapok Relatives at the Arboretum

By EDWARD MURRAY



THE BOMBAX FAMILY (Bombacaceae) contains many beautiful, curious, and economically important members from tropical and subtropical parts of the world. They include the baobab trees, balsa wood, the durian fruit, and our native flannel bush. The kapok tree (*Ceiba pentandra*) is grown as an ornamental in southern Florida. In tropical areas the abundant cottony floss surrounding each seed is harvested for stuffing mattresses and life preservers. In our mild Southern California climate, it has been possible to cultivate several kapok relatives at the Los Angeles State and County Arboretum.

A curious ornamental from Mexico and Guatemala is the Mexican hand flower, (*Chiranthodendron pentadactylon*) "hand flower tree with five fingers." Although a shy bloomer in our area, the flowers are worth searching for. Each takes the form of a miniature red hand with five fingers out of a fuzzy, cup-like base. From Aztec times to present, this flower has been sold in Mexican markets as a heart tonic.

The red silk cotton tree (*Bombax ceiba*) from tropical Asia has performed surprisingly well at the Arboretum. Until last fall when it was downed by a Santa Ana wind storm, a specimen about 25 feet high on Tallac Knoll had produced many flowers on stout leafless branches each spring. These flowers were outstanding: large, red, and waxy. Many

younger plants are maturing at other spots on the grounds, and we can eventually expect to see more of these wonderful blooms in years to come.

Floss-silk is the common name applied to the South American genus

*Chorisia*. The two species cultivated at the Arboretum are vigorous and very worthwhile for Southern California providing a spectacular show of autumn and winter blooms. Both species are evergreen or briefly de-



Fluff-filled seed pods still cling to the branches of *Chorisia insignis* when the creamy white flowers emerge in the fall.

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The spiky, bottle-shaped trunk of the pink floss-silk tree (*Chorisia speciosa*) may reach a height of 60 feet.

ciduous with leaves divided into leaflets like the fingers on a hand.

White floss-silk tree (*Chorisia insignis*) is native to Peru. The slender branched tree may ultimately reach 50 feet. In order to conserve water for use during periods of drought the dull greenish trunk is bulbous or bottle-shaped. To ward off animals that would devour the flowers and/or fruit, the trunk is armed with numerous stout spines. The creamy-white flowers with yellowish centers are very attractive against the blue skies of winter but present a potential litter problem over pavement. The large, avocado-shaped fruit also makes for messy removal problems in the lawn. The brittle limbs may also break during a storm. But all in all the white floss-silk tree flowers during the short days of the year when one cherishes anything in blossom.

Pink floss-silk tree (*Chorisia speciosa*) is native to Brazil and Argentina. It may reach 50 feet after many years of growth. The trunk is similarly dull-greenish, more or less bulbous to conserve water and armed heavily or lightly with stout spines. The flowers are 3 to 5 inches in diameter; the petals are usually pubescent (softly hairy) and variously colored from white or yellow to red or violet and usually streaked or shaded creamy towards the center of the blossoms. The seed capsules are up to 8 inches long and shaped somewhat like a very slender avocado. In the spring these capsules burst open to display the white, cottony masses of kapok-like material which envelops the wrinkled black pea-sized seeds. These germinate quite readily and are an actual nuisance at the Arboretum in that many unwanted seedlings result as the filmy kapok transports the seeds many feet away from the mother tree. Although the tree has brittle branches and offers a litter problem due to its flowers and fruits, it grows rapidly at the Arboretum and should be fast-growing in the home garden. Autumn and win-



ter-flowering trees are at a premium and pink floss-silk tree is one of the most unusual and one of the most beautiful trees at this season. The tree is certainly a conversation piece and attracts more than its share of visitor attention from September through February.

The Arboretum has introduced several cultivars through the years. Cultivar 'Arcadia' has deep pink flowers from November through February. It was introduced by the Arboretum in 1978 and promptly offered to the City of Arcadia for street planting as well as to the members of the California Arboretum Foundation. 'Lasca Beauty' was introduced by the Arboretum in 1976. It has 5-inch deep rose-pink flowers in mid-autumn. In 1974 'Los Angeles Beautiful' was introduced by the Arboretum for its unusually beautiful rose-pink flowers which are produced more abundantly and later into winter (December through February). 'September Splendour' is a 1976 Arboretum introduction which is the earliest to flower. 'Majestic Beauty' has rich pink flowers in the autumn and is available through your local nurseryman. These cultivars are easily cleft grafted and should become more readily available in the nursery trade in the years to come.

Visitors to the Arboretum can readily find the large, swollen greenish trunks with their stout spines in several locations on the grounds: on Tallac Knoll, near the old Education Building, and west of Ayres Hall near the site of the annual Baldwin Bonanza, and in the main entrance lawn where young specimens of the named varieties may be found. The Mexican hand flower is growing on the east side of the upper lake.

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James Bauml

*Since the time of the Aztecs, people have been intrigued by the hand-like stamens of Chiranthodendron pentadactylon.*



William Aplin

*Brown lines mark the deep pink flowers of Chorisia speciosa 'Arcadia,' a tree introduced by the Arboretum in 1978.*





Murray, Edward. 1985. "Kapok relatives at the arboretum." *Garden* 9(5), 5–7.

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