

## **Qinling Maple, *Acer tsinglingense*; or Franchet's maple, *Acer sterculiaceum* subsp. *franchetii***

*Douglas Justice*

China serves up an enormous variety of plants for our gardens and landscapes, so much so that the plant explorer Ernest Henry "Chinese" Wilson famously called China "the mother of gardens." One need only think of the numbers of cultivated *Viburnum*, *Rhododendron*, and *Magnolia* species that hail from China to get an idea of the magnitude of temperate plant diversity there. While impressive in number, many Chinese species are too tender for cultivation in much of North America. So when a "new" cold-hardy Chinese maple comes along, it is cause for gardeners to sit up and take note. Such is the case with a maple collected in the Qinling (Tsingling) Mountains of Gansu Province during the 1996 NACPEC trip: the Qingling maple (*Acer tsinglingense*)—or Franchet's maple (*Acer sterculiaceum* subsp. *franchetii*) as it's being called in North America.

Qinling maple is native to the mountains of Shaanxi, Henan, and Gansu provinces in north central China at elevations of 1200 to 1500 meters (3940 to 4920 feet). This area of China is an important biodiversity hot spot, with many endemic plant and animal species. Two parallel mountain ranges—the Qinling and the Daba—trend east-west, dividing the moist, subtropical to warm temperate south and the drier, cold temperate north. The northern boundary is



By either name, this maple may be a promising addition to North American landscapes.

defined by the Qinling Mountains, where temperatures are considerably cooler than in the southern Daba Mountains at the same elevation. According to the collection notes from the 1996 expedition, this species was found grow-





Autumn foliage color of Qinling (or Franchet's) maple.

ing on a steep stream bank alongside a variety of familiar temperate plants including *Carpinus* (hornbeam), *Malus* (crabapple), and *Cornus* (dogwood), a good indication that it should be relatively cold hardy.

Franchet's maple is found to the southwest of the Qinling Mountains but there is some debate about whether the two species are truly separable. North American botanists generally consider them the same species; however, distinctions have been noted among some individual specimens growing in cultivation. The question is, are the distinctions clear enough to warrant a split (as recommended in *Flora of China*)? According to the *Flora of China* account, *A. tsinglingense* displays three-lobed leaves with wide-spreading side lobes, while the leaves of *A. sterculiaceum* subsp. *franchetii* are of a thicker texture and have forward-pointing lobes. The young branches of Qinling maple are described as light brown (vs. darker for Franchet's), and the inflorescences, individual flowers, and samaras are smaller in Qinling maple. In gardens, *A. tsinglingense* appears to

be a robust, medium-sized maple with a strong branch structure that produces an upright-spreading crown. Leaves have a papery texture and turn beautiful shades of apricot and red in autumn.

It is worth noting that cultivated plants of *A. tsinglingense*—specimens at the United States National Arboretum and the Morris Arboretum—have often been described as handsome or attractive, while those of Franchet's maple are widely dismissed as dull or coarse. Most European accounts list *A. sterculiaceum* subsp. *franchetii* as having little ornamental value, and plants at the University of

British Columbia Botanical Garden grown from older seed collections made in Hubei and Sichuan Provinces (to the south and west of the Qinling collections) could also easily be described in this disapproving light. On the other hand, the response of maples to the climate in eastern North America is often manifested in neater, more compact growth and autumn leaves with more saturated colors. This could explain much of the difference, but until a wider sample—representing trees from the Qinling and beyond—are grown under the same conditions, these questions will go unanswered. Whether we are seeing a minor variant of Franchet's maple or a bona fide species in Qinling maple is an open question. More research is required to settle the science, but judging by the plants in gardens, this fine-looking maple appears worthy of wider cultivation, at least in eastern North America.

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