

*Garrya ovata*

Autumn colour

GENNADY FIRSOV reflects on some of the outstanding species of trees that come into their own in the autumn at the St Petersburg Botanic Garden.

Autumn on the shores of the Gulf of Finland arrives in the last days of August. The leaves of the birch and the elm are the first to turn yellow. The red and orange berries of the barberry, the mountain ash and the hawthorn stand out brightly as do the ribbed variegated berries of the euonymus, which hang from thin fruit bearing stems. One cannot but be struck by the amazing variety of colours achieved by nature.

Following the birch, *Acer platanoides* gradually becomes multicoloured. This is the only native maple around St Petersburg and it is worth coming to the park of the botanical garden to have a look at it, just to lift one's spirits in dull weather. Other types of maple, such as *Acer pseudosieboldianum*, *A. barbinerve*, *A. mandshuricum*, *A. mono* and *A. ginnala*, change colour from yellow to red. *Acer rubrum* var. *drummondii* has leaves with three to five points, which in the autumn assume various tints of red, pink, scarlet and deep yellow. In the summer they are deep green on top and dove-grey underneath; this tree

*Aronia arbutifolia**Viburnum furcatum**Rhododendron luteum*

is particularly beautiful when planted on its own, and not just in the autumn, in spring it displays numerous red flowers and at the beginning of summer bright red seeds.

In autumn the leaves of *Euonymus maackii*, *E. verrucosus* and *E. sacrosanctus*, *Quercus rubra*, *Vitis amurensis*, turn to every imaginable shade of pink, purple and raspberry. The bright autumn colours of *Rosa koreana* are no less beautiful than its flowers.

The leaves of *Aristolochia manshuriensis*, *Kalopanax septemlobus*, *Morus alba*, *Sorbaria sorbifolia*, *Padus maackii*, and *Phellodendron amurense* turn golden. The yellow birch (*Betula alleghaniensis*) is a tree of medium or large size, through the upper branches of which one can see the flaky amber-coloured strips of the golden-grey bark. The oval-shaped, downy leaves of this American exotic plant take on a rich yellow colour similar to the local Russian birch trees.

Carya ovata is a nut bearing tree from the deciduous woods of North America, which is admired for the rich autumn yellow hues of its large pinnate leaves—up to 35 cm in length.

In this same period, pine needles turn yellow and fall, and the fruit of the guelder rose and the acorns from the oak tree ripen. The beginning of autumn gradually changes into what we call in Russia the 'golden autumn'. This is

*Sorbus sibirica*

the most beautiful time in the parks and gardens of St Petersburg, lasting from mid-September to mid-October, from the time when the needles of the Siberian larch start to mature until the time when the leaves have fallen from the birches. With the low rustling sound of the leaves falling, the trees gradually become bare. In sunny weather a thick living wall of *Parthenocissus inserta* shines with a red glow. This liana has been widely cultivated in Russia for many years. And at this time of year one can see *Viburnum furcatum* especially in collections of rhododendrons, or in its native land, in the hilly mixed and shady coniferous woods of Sakhalin and South Kuril. In autumn the leaves become bright violet-crimson. Looking at *Sorbus commixta* and *S. sibirica*, I remember the words of the famous Russian song: 'In the garden the red rowan-tree shines like a fire...' *Aronia arbutifolia*, a beautiful flowering bush of medium height, is prized by European gardeners and in its native North America for its long lasting dark red fruit and, in particularly, for the red autumn colour of its leaves. *Photinia villosa* from South-East Asia is a relation of the hawthorn, and during the autumn, in sheltered places and appropriate conditions it can be eye-catching. Apart from the leaves, at this time of year small bright red egg shaped berries decorate it. The yellowing leaves of *Sorbus cashmiriana* are magnificent on a background of white berries reminding one of large pearls. The clusters of berries of *Euonymus maximowiczianus*, look like a Christmas tree decoration, standing out on a background of pale pink leaves. At this time of year the resplendent scarlet and lilac-coloured leaves

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Betula alleghaniensis

of the deciduous rhododendrons, *Rhododendron luteum*, *R. schlippenbachii* and *R. japonicum*—are incredibly beautiful. With some of these one can expect a second blooming when the flowers are set off against evergreen foliage before the lower leaves fall off. When the frost comes the remaining leaves become cylindrical-shaped along the main rib of the leaf and will stay like this all winter. The main leaf fall then begins. Fallen leaves cover lawns and roads and lodge on the tops of spruce trees. Bronze, yellow, red, raspberry, purple-violet leaves display a dazzling contrast with the bluish-green pine needles. Barberry, *Cerasus nipponica* and the wild damson have luxuriant autumn colour, which blends in beautifully with pine trees; these species are suitable for small gardens. They are beautiful next to Manchurian maples and *Acer pseudosieboldianum* and are also suitable for larger areas and parks.



Above *Cerasus nipponica*. Below right *Acer japonicum*. Bottom right *Photinia villosa*.

Autumn is the season of great change for deciduous conifers. The metamorphosis in colour from green to gold takes place gradually. The European larch remains green for a long time and its needles are the last to fall. The blue and yellow colours go well together. Evergreen conifers with their dark green or silvery blue needles enhance the effect with the bright tones of the deciduous ones.

By mid-October when the leaves of the birches have all fallen, late autumn starts. But it will be a long time before the bright green split leaves of the silver birch enliven and colour the park again. In early winter when ponds freeze over, various grey and muted colours are introduced into the bright green patches of the alpine currant and guelder rose.



*Acer pseudosieboldianum**Padus maackii**Acer barbinerve*

Egbert Wolf wrote in 1915: 'By creating a plantation of such species, which in the autumn change their green hues to bright yellow, purple or variegated glittering tinges, we may impart the particular splendour of the somniferous agony of nature...The climatic and soil conditions have a considerable effect on the depth of colours. In fertile, slightly damp soil and in the presence of humid air, the foliage is luscious and bright; but with poor nutrition of the vegetation and dry air—the colours do not achieve the same perfection and turn pale sooner.

'There is evidence that species such as the red maple, though they can also grow in earth containing lime, in such conditions rarely display the full palette of colours. On the other hand, at the end of October, I once replanted a *Cerasus vulgaris* with bright red leaves, which I had collected in the hills of Khopra, in the nursery garden of the botanical garden in St Petersburg and there its autumn loveliness vanished.

'We should listen to the advice of the gardeners of the past: the effect of colours of the golden autumn depends on the skilful mixture of "autumn beauties" in the area. Growing freely among bushes and trees, the curling lianas may introduce a light, graceful effect into the general picture. Depending on the light and the relief of the location, they enhance the impression. But the taste and the subtlety of the arrangement and its harmony must compliment each other to achieve perfection'.