

MAGNIFICENT MAGNOLIAS



Magnolia campbellii, Gaoligongshan, Yunnan



Magolia campbellii, Gaoligongshan

It is often botanically interesting to visit places outside of their 'normal' season and by that I mean the time everyone somehow decides is THE time to go to a particular place. There is no denying that some areas do peak at certain times and the established wisdom is go to China in June-July and perhaps again in September if you want to be bombarded with the widest range of blue flowers you can imagine from gentians to monk's-hoods, delphiniums and even blue onions in the shape of *Allium beesianum*. A lot of this seasonal abundance is attributable to the spread of rainfall with most arriving in summer, whereas the rush of flora in the Mediterranean, Anatolia and Central Asia responds to winter rain and snow, with a peak in spring. However, there are spring flowers in Western China, it's just not that many by comparison.

I had begun my trip to Yunnan in late-March with the intention of finding lower elevation orchids, since many do flower early. However, as it turned out, what I encountered was protectionism and bureaucracy, combined with the fact that local depredation of many species had left only remote populations and these were out of bounds to foreigners. One more enlightened location was Loashan Botanic Garden, right up against the Vietnamese border where our pleasant and welcoming Chinese host had carved out a fabulous



Cyclamen alpinum, Antalya



Paphiopedilum malipoense, Laoshan BG



Paphiopedilum hirsutissimum, Laoshan BG

garden that was part wilderness and part collection. The former was a subtropical paradise with numerous *Amorphothallus yunnanensis*, *Primulina* and the prize of the cryptic *Paphiopedilum malipoense* (a localised and scarce endemic) and *P. hirsutissimum* with its' handlebar moustache sepals. There was even decent accommodation to stay in this stunning location. I could have spent many more hours wandering around photographing the exotic flora here.

To cut a long story short, nothing else quite worked out until moved further north and drove into the hills of Gaoligongshan, a wonderful name for a wonderful place. The road wound its way up through thickly forested hills and suddenly there was the first *Magnolia campbellii*, nestled among the trees but out of reach. This is the aristocrat of this charismatic genus, and it couldn't be missed. Out came the drone (yes, I'm sorry to say we had to resort to technology to try and get close enough for photography, but there was no one else up there to bother) and Adong skilfully manoeuvred it between trees to get some (what we thought at the time were) decent photos. However, as is often the case we need not have bothered. Various other interesting shrubs appeared from



Amorphothallus yunnanensis, Laoshan BG



Primulina sp., Laoshan BG



Primula sonchifolia, Gaoligongshan



Rhododendron sinogrande, Gaoligongshan



Rhododendron sinogrande, Gaoligongshan



Primula sp., Gaoligongshan



Rhododendron sulfureum, Gaoligongshan



Arisaema nepenthoides, Gaoligongshan

Pieris formosa to blood-red *Rhododendron arboreum* and bright yellow *R. sulfureum* which grew as an epiphyte and lithophyte. A colony of a *Primula* sp. was found in a seep, growing with *Arisaema nepenthoides*, a plant that varied in size from a few centimetres to a metre and was very common, the somewhat sinister spathes indeed looking like the famed pitcher plants of tropical Asia; the *Nepenthes*. Cresting the pass we immediately found the first of many gorgeous *Primula sonchifolia*, bursting from their big egg-like bases with heads of soft lavender flowers, forming delightful, scattered colonies on loose mossy granitic soils. Then another stunning *Magnolia campbellii*, absolutely bursting with big white-pink flowers. Even better specimens followed including one I was able to scramble down and get close to. I had always wanted to see this magnificent species flowering in the wild. A few years back I did see *Magnolia kobus* in Japan and they had been a real highlight of that trip. Now I was face to face with its big cousin and what an impressive plant it was. The flowering was at its peak each huge 15-25-centimetre-wide flower suspended on leafless branches like an extravagant shoal of floppy jellyfish and as we progressed further into the luxuriant woods, we saw variants with deeper pink flowers as well as increasing numbers of the architectural *Rhododendron sinogrande*, one

of the big-leaved rhodos. There were several magnificent old, giant trees decked in trusses of pale yellow. In places these two woody heavyweights mixed together.

I am unlikely to ever return here at this season, which made it extra special to see such plants in the wild. *Magnolia campbellii* is not one of the commonly grown species, it is just too big, takes too long to flower well and unless you can stand on a hillside in Gaoligongshan it's hard to appreciate the flowers at the top of a tree. But it has always been one of those special plants for me, dating back to my time in Cornwall (UK) at Heligan when I first saw them. I co-wrote *The Plant Hunters* shortly afterwards, which included the exploits of Joseph Hooker in Sikkim, northern India. He had travelled there with his friend the British political officer Dr Archibald Campbell and first collected the plant in Sikkim. Their adventure included incarceration by the locals, and this led to annexation of the Kingdom of Sikkim by the British. Hooker named this wonderful plant after his friend in 1855 in appreciation of his assistance during his expeditions. And I've been wanting to see it close-up ever since, with only a distant view in Sikkim eighteen-years-ago before this. We all have our botanical ambitions, mine are wide and varied. This was one of them and I'll never look at a *Magnolia* in a garden quite the same again.



Pink form of *Magnolia campbellii* with
Rhododendron sinogrande on the Gaoligongshan.