

Presenting *Parrotia persica* 'Vanessa'

Your SMA 2014 Urban Tree of the Year

Manager of Parks for Surrey, British Columbia Owen Croy wrote the Tree of Merit column in *City Trees* about *Parrotia persica* 'Vanessa' just last spring. He is gratified that this tree sailed on to take the big prize, SMA Urban Tree of the Year. *Parrotia persica* is most often called simply parrotia or Persian ironwood. Here's an excerpt of Croy's column about 'Vanessa' parrotia.

The Persian ironwood tree is native to the lower mountain slopes of northern Iran, and it has been planted widely in cities across Europe and North America for many years. It has great colour in the spring, with glossy, green, red-tipped leaves that later turn a darker green through the summer. Fall colour is spectacular, often with leaves of multiple colours on the tree at the same time: orange, purple, yellow and green. When older, this tree has flaky grey bark that is very attractive, giving it year-round appeal.

The cultivar 'Vanessa' emerged from Europe in the 1970s and is now widely cultivated in North American nurseries. 'Vanessa' is upright, almost columnar, with branches that arch gracefully outward towards the tip. It is a slow-growing small tree, reaching a height of about 11 metres (36 feet) at maturity. Perhaps because of its slow growth rate, it seems that much of the available nursery stock is slightly smaller than would be typical for street tree planting programs. It is hardy in USDA zones 4-8.

In Surrey, 'Vanessa' is being planted as a street tree where there are overhead lines in close proximity to the planting strips. Staff report that it responds extremely well to clearance pruning and has fewer crossing branches than either the straight species or the cultivar 'Ruby Vase'. Branch unions tend to be very strong, and 'Vanessa' doesn't seem to develop the levels of included bark that we have observed in other species of columnar trees. We have also noted that in well-irrigated soils, young 'Vanessa' specimens don't seem to develop fall colour that is as vibrant as the straight species, but only time will tell if this trait continues as the trees mature.

Surrey Tree and Landscape Manager Steve Whitton adds that parrotia planted in the City's center about 10 years ago in structural soil (in a trench one meter deep by one meter wide) have grown very well. Whitton says, "They have more than tripled in size. This was a great success story for both structural soil and parrotia."

Here are some additional testimonials to the value of Persian ironwood, and especially of 'Vanessa', to our city streets.

This tree has proven in our setting to be incredibly resilient to drought stress and pests. With its versatility, hardiness, interesting bark, unique growth form, and spectacular fall colour, what more could you ask for in a city tree? —Lanny Englund, Manager of Urban Forestry in Coquitlam, British Columbia



A young 'Vanessa' on the streets of Surrey, BC • Photo by Owen Croy



Parrotia 'Vanessa' fall color • Photo by Owen Croy



Parrotia persica bark • Photo by Josh Coceano

We began using *Parrotia* only within the past few years, and I've been delighted so far. We have used 'Vanessa' as a street tree in several residential and commercial locations. Its transplantability, form, foliage, and fall color are all appealing features.

I have also watched with interest a pair of 6-inch (152-mm) caliper street trees planted some years ago by a resident. The trees withstood some significant abuse when the stately old home was renovated, then burned, and was then renovated again. Three years of construction traffic and abuse, and the trees are thriving! I expect that we'll be planting more *Parrotia persica* in Upper Arlington for good reasons. —Steve Cothrel, Superintendent of Parks and Forestry, Parks and Recreation Department, Upper Arlington, Ohio

Ilove it; it's not bothered by drought nor long wet spells. No sign of pests. Just a neat, well-behaved little tree! I have had a *Parrotia* 'Vanessa' growing in my front yard for about 15 years. I picked it up at a local plant sale in a 5-gallon pot. It's now about 18 feet (5.5 m) tall and just beautiful. It provides reliable yellow/red fall color in an area not known for fall color. It is still tightly vertical with some very nice muscular trunks which clearly identify why it's also called Persian ironwood. —Steve Shurtz, Urban Forestry & Landscape Manager at City/Parish of Baton Rouge, Louisiana

Congratulations to Persian parrotia! *Parrotia persica* has many desirable characteristics that make it a great street tree here in Burlington, Vermont. The tree grows in a variety of soil textures and types. It has succeeded in tough sites where crabapples failed to establish. It is also tolerant to heat, cold, and drought conditions. In Burlington, newly planted parrotia are watered for the first two growing seasons. *Parrotia persica* are planted beneath utility lines because of their slow and low growth. We have not had any problems with fungal or insect pests yet.

In addition to the great physical and biological characteristics, Persian parrotia is visually appealing. It displays beech-like bark when young, tiny pinkish-red flowers in spring, purple leaves at bud burst that change to a waxy deep green all summer, and bright orange to red color through the fall. Parrotia is a wonderful species to add to any urban or ornamental landscape. —Brian Sullivan, Municipal Specialist, Burlington, Vermont Department of Parks and Recreation



Parrotia buds • Photo by Steve Cothrel



Parrotia fall foliage • Photo by Steve Cothrel



Young 'Vanessa' parrotia trees looking sharp in Renton, Washington, the spring following planting. Photo by Terry Flatley

We planted 'Vanessa' parrotia as a street tree in 4 x 8 feet (app. 1.2 x 2.4 m) cut-outs using tree grates during December of 2011 (we can plant trees all winter long due to our mild climate here in Renton, Washington). Other than some poor stock we received from a nursery (which they replaced immediately for free), we have had 100% survival to date.

They received some supplemental watering between June and September (our driest season) at the rate of once per two weeks and they showed little or no stress. We also planted one at a different site that unlike the others, did not receive supplemental watering, and even this tree has survived nicely.

'Vanessa' is an upright, columnar growing tree that fits nicely in our downtown area with zero building setbacks and along the curb-line. I plan on using more parrotia in the future based upon this trial planting and appreciate their tolerance for dry, hot urban conditions. —Terry Flatley, Certified Arborist - Municipal Specialist, Urban Forestry and Natural Resources Manager, Renton Washington

Some of the first trees planted during the kickoff of TreeVitalize Pittsburgh in April of 2008 were parrotia. The 2-inch (51-mm) caliper trees were 8-9 feet (2.4-2.7 m) tall and planted in 3 x 10 feet (.9 x 3 m) tree pits. As of November 2013, those trees are now 5-inch (127-mm) caliper (4-inch/102-mm DBH) and 17 feet (5.2 m) tall. Residents love the beautiful fall color and were very concerned about the tree's health when the bark began to peel. After we explained how the bark will continue to exfoliate and change colors, they are now excited for the bark to mature. One tree was defoliated in late summer by a gas leak and recovered very well the next year. We've observed that parrotia seems to have a low to moderate salt tolerance. Prune only in full leaf, as pruning in fall/winter has caused extensive bleeding followed by mold, much worse than we have seen on any maple. Parrotia stands up very well to vandalism as the wood is strong and doesn't break or tear easily. —Matthew Erb, Director of Urban Forestry, Tree Pittsburgh 🌿