

Unusual and Mysterious: The Black Pussy Willow

by RICHARD E. WEAVER, JR.

The Arnold Arboretum's next biennial plant dividend to our Friends will be a rooted cutting of *Salix melanostachys*, the Black Pussy Willow. We have always tried to offer plants that are both desirable and unusual, and this year's choice is no exception. The Black Pussy Willow is a most unusual plant in several respects. First, its origin is unknown and its exact classification is a matter of debate. It has been cultivated by the Japanese for years, but the plant is not known in the wild. Only a single clone exists, and this consists strictly of male plants. Therefore the status of *S. melanostachys* as a distinct species is thrown into considerable doubt. It has been classified as a variety of *S. gracilistyla*, but it differs from that very beautiful Japanese species in a number of important technical characteristics (e.g., non-silky catkins, hairless twigs, shorter scales, etc.) The Black Pussy Willow most likely arose as a hybrid between several willow species. It probably should be called by a cultivar name, and there are several Japanese ones available, but that will be for a willow specialist to decide.

The second unusual aspect of the Black Pussy Willow is the color of its catkins ("pussies"). Black is essentially nonexistent in the plant world. The very few so-called black flowers or other plant structures are invariably very dark shades of red and purple. So it is with *Salix melanostachys* (the species named from the Greek *melano*, meaning very dark, and *stachys* meaning spike or catkin.) The scales of the catkins are a very dark red-purple, beautifully contrasting with the brick-red anthers that turn to yellow as they mature. But do not expect the gigantic catkins seen on sprays of Pussy Willow sold in florist shops. The "pussies" of *S. melanostachys* are rather small, but they are profusely produced, and they are set on reddish twigs.

When your plant arrives, hopefully in April 1978, plant it outdoors, either in a nursery area or in its permanent place in your garden. Small as it may seem to be, it will grow quickly. Perhaps you should soak its roots in water for a few hours before planting, and surely protect it with stakes or chicken wire from lawn mowers and erring feet. Do not take pity on its small size and try to keep it indoors.

Now a few tips for siting and maintenance: (1) Willows tolerate or even prefer moist or soggy soil, but most, including *Salix melano-*

stachys, will do quite well in a drier, but not parched, situation. (2) The more sun the plant receives, the more compactly it will grow, and the more catkins it will produce. It will do reasonably well in partial shade, however. (3) The plant will grow to be a bushy shrub about 10 feet in height and spread. For a few years it may be a bit spindly, so judicious pruning may be required. (4) The catkins appear in early to mid-March, while the yellow, red, or copper flowers of the Witch Hazel, *Hamamelis* \times *intermedia*, are still in good shape, or while the flowers of the Cornelian Cherries, *Cornus mas* and *C. officinalis* are beginning to show color. Siting the Black Pussy Willow against any of these would produce a striking contrast.

The Black Pussy Willow is still rare in the United States. Our original stock was received in 1971 from the Kalmthout Arboretum in Belgium. Enjoy your plant, nurture it, and share it with friends. Cuttings root easily at nearly any time of year.

