

***Dipelta floribunda*: A Shrub of Subtle Beauty**

Michael Dosmann

In the horticultural world, it is not uncommon to hear plant lovers laud a particular plant's endless weeks of flowering, months of dazzling autumn leaf color, and flamboyant, persistent fruits the size of golf balls. I can appreciate plants like that, and yet sometimes I want something subtler. English novelist George Meredith wrote that "Speech is the small change of silence," and as I apply that maxim to the garden I find that I am drawn toward plants that possess quiet interest. One such plant is *Dipelta floribunda*, the rosy dipelta, a shrub native to central and western China.

The Arboretum has cultivated rosy dipelta for over a century, the first seeds coming to the Arboretum in February 1911 from E. H. Wilson's collection from Fang Hsien, western Hubei, the previous October. He made the collection from plants growing in "sunny places" at altitudes of 1,200 to 1,800 meters (3,937 to 5,905 feet). Seventy years later, the Arboretum received its latest accessions of this species, collected in Hubei during the 1980 Sino-American Botanical Expedition. Plants from two separate accessions from the 1980 SABE grow in the Arboretum, as does one large plant (accession 14514-B) from the Wilson accession. The Explorers Garden atop Bussey Hill serves as perhaps the best place to see these plants, though there is also another fine mass planting of rosy dipelta along Peters Hill Road.

Dipelta floribunda bears fragrant, pinkish-white flowers, typically blooming in early May. Each tubular corolla comprises five fused petals, with the two upper lobes forming a top lip, while the basal three lobes form a lower lip. Yellow pigment splashes along the lips and throat of the flower, no doubt serving as nectary guides for the bees that pollinate the flowers. At the base of the corolla are greenish bracts

that increase in size as the growing season advances, surrounding the fruits (two-seeded achenes) as they mature. The round, 1-inch-wide, papery bracts provide a bit of late summer interest—particularly as they blush a tawny pink—and also aid in the wind dispersal of the seeds. A casual examination of *Dipelta* reveals similarities with *Kolkwitzia amabilis*, beauty bush, also introduced by Wilson. The two genera are closely related to each other within Caprifoliaceae, the honeysuckle family; their flowers look similar, though *Kolkwitzia* fruits have but a single seed and lack *Dipelta*'s papery bracts.

Rosy dipelta is a large, vase-shaped shrub that typically attains a height of 12 to 15 feet (3.7 to 4.6 meters) and a width of 6 to 8 feet (1.8 to 2.4 meters). The leaves are lanceolate and rather coarse, and tend to abscise in the autumn with little effective color change. But when they do drop from the plant they reveal another bit of quiet interest. With a few years of age, the bark of the stems begins to shed in long, vertical, tawny-white strips. In the garden, some may think this somewhat messy (plantsman Michael Dirr muses that "the entire matrix ... assumes the presence of a pile of sticks"). However, I like this trait for both its tactile quality and its visual appeal in the winter. An undulating row of several of these fine shrubs at the back of a mixed perennial border provides an excellent backdrop, particularly when they are pruned to remove lower branches. Mix in several beauty bushes to extend the flowering season a few weeks, add a *Heptacodium miconioides* (seven-son flower) to provide late summer blooms, and enjoy all three of them for their habit and bark interest.

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