



Pieris

Pieris is a shrub that flourishes well in Brittany (as it does in Britain) and is a small genus of seven species. The character of shrubs - and all garden plants - settle into growing in different ways, some of them like wisteria, hortensias, roses, all of which are indigenous to China and East Asia. However long ago they were introduced and cultivated into Europe look as if they belong here and look comfortable, but somehow *Pieris*, although they grow well, remain's an interloper, *Photinia* is another one, somehow they have the look of wanting to make a quick departure and return to their own surroundings.

In the case of the *Pieris* there are four of the seven species that are considered worthy garden plants. All evergreen with white flowers though as usual their beauty is in inverse ratio to their hardiness, the tenderest kind being the handsomest. They also follow closely the pattern established by so many of the families of similar American and Asian distribution; the American species being the hardiest, and the first to be introduced, but later surpassed, in beauty and in texture by their oriental cousins.

So the first introduction into Europe and into Britain was *Pieris floribunda* and it was found and collected in 1806 by a Scotsman John Lyon who was the source of hundreds of Appalachian plants which he shipped to London to sell. His reward (after his death) was to have a genus named in his honour, the *Lyonia* genus which is closely related to the *Pieris* and consists of 35 species of shrubs some of which are garden worthy. His *Pieris floribunda* is very hardy, it also holds the panicles of its flowers sturdily upright, giving it a look of self-righteousness, whereas all the oriental kinds are, have much droopy uh, flowers.

The belle of the oriental ball is *Pieris formosa* a Himalayan species introduced about 1858 of which there are now a number of varieties, and it is the best of these that we mostly see growing in Brittany. It is the variety sent home by George Forrest during his second of his five expeditions to China in 1910 that he found this wonderful shrub; at first it was believed to be a distinct species but under the microscope it was realised it was a varietal example of the earlier *Pieris formosa*. George Forrest found it in the province of Yunnan and collected the seed, which he sent to one of his sponsor's Arthur Bulley, what a name, but who owned Bees Nurseries on the Wirral in Cheshire. The shrub grown from the seed is still to be seen flourishing in what is now the Ness Botanic Gardens; as upon Mr Bulley's death in 1947 the nursery and grounds were donated to the University of Liverpool. I have seen it twice and it is now about 12ft or so tall, and what was extraordinary on the last occasion was the sound of the thousands of bees buzzing around the lily of the valley shaped flowers, it was a very special moment, to see a plant whose parent seed was collected from deepest China, sent probably by very slow post to a nursery in north-west England where a hundred years later I could have the privilege of seeing the result of the great George Forrest's assiduous collecting and watch

the bees performing the same duty as they do in China

The name Pieris seems to be derived from the Nine Muses called the Pierides, the genus was named by David Don in 1834 when Professor of Botany at Kings College London, he gave no reason for his choice of 'Pieris' which is also the family name of something that we don't welcome too much in the garden, especially in the vegetable garden, the cabbage-white butterfly. Perhaps he was reminded of the similarity between the fluttering wings of the butterfly and the flowers of the shrub.

