Halesia diptera var. *magniflora*

Roy Lancaster and silverbells in May

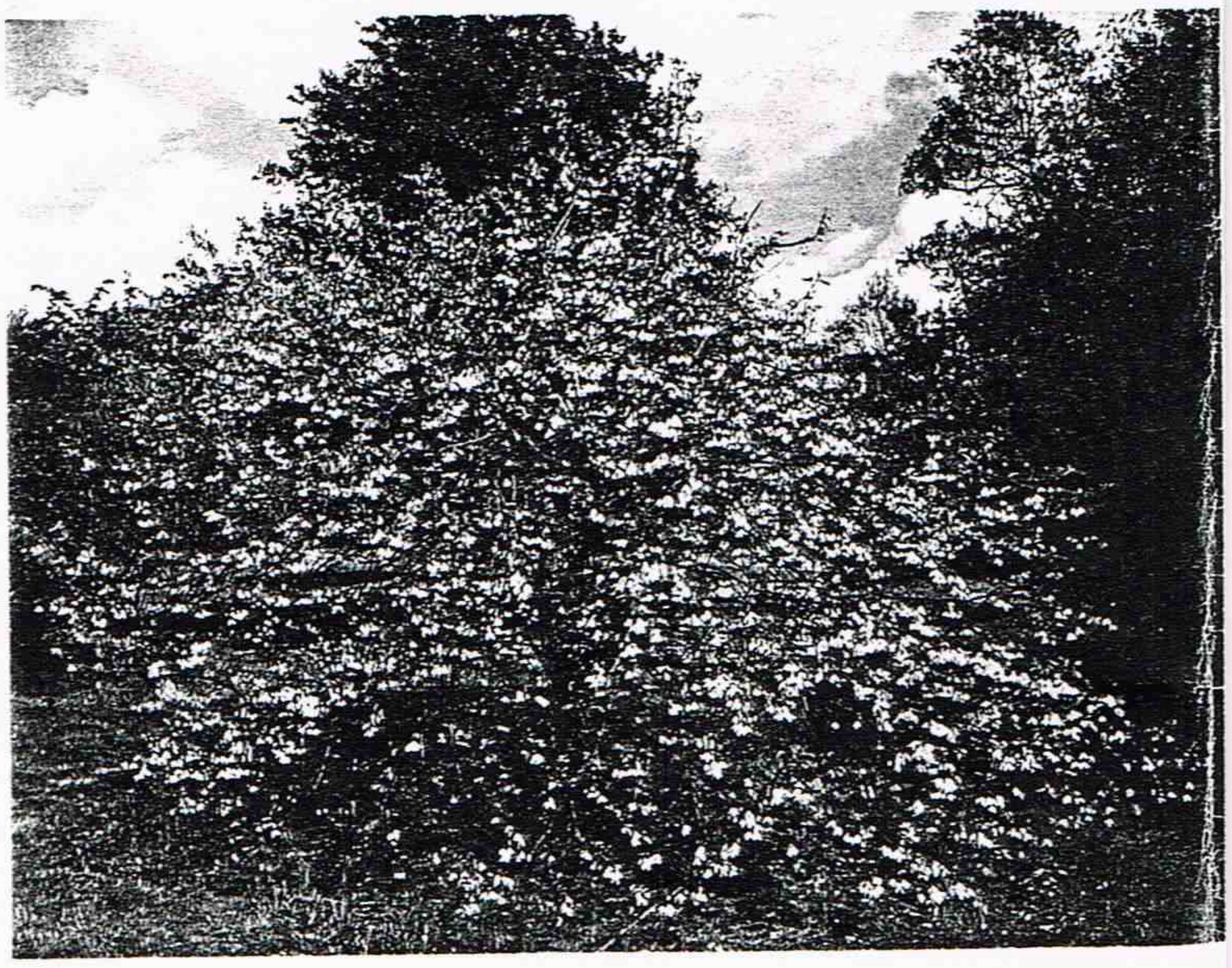
IT WAS LIKE NO OTHER fruit I had ever seen, brown and pear-shaped, about 4cm (1½in) long, with a short slender beak and four wings running lengthwise. Hundreds of these rather woody objects hung singly or in bunches along the previous year's shoots of a low, wide-spreading, multi-stemmed tree growing in a wooded enclosure at Rivington near Horwich in Lancashire. The year was 1955 and, with a bird-watching friend, I discovered the tree while on a winter walkabout in the Pennines. I later identified it as the Carolina silverbell or snowdrop tree, *Halesia carolina (tetraptera)* and concluded that it must have been planted in this apparently wild site during the construction, which took place earlier this century, of the nearby Rivington gardens for the then Lord Leverhulme.

There is something very special about unusual plants seen for the first time when you are young or new to gardening and ever since that bright, clear, finger-numbing day I have had a particular affection for this hardy, deciduous tree. A few years ago, I raised a nice strong specimen from wild-collected seed. When I realised that my garden was too full to do it justice, I gave it to a neighbour so that I might continue to enjoy its progress. *Halesia carolina* is one of a small genus of deciduous trees whose chief merit lies in their white or pink tinted bell-shaped pendulous flowers borne from the leaf axils of the previous year's shoots in May. These are followed by winged fruits which offer a ready means of increase.

In the same family as *Styrax*, the genus comprises only five species (a sixth, *H. grandifolia* is sometimes recognised), all but one native to the south-eastern United States. The exception is *Halesia macgregorii* from eastern China. Of the

Photographs: Roy Lancaster

Halesia diptera var. *magniflora*. The flowers (*left*) are around twice the size of the species and copiously produced in May. There is a specimen (*below*) in the Sir Harold Hillier Gardens and Arboretum, near Romsey, Hampshire, now 5m high with a 7m spread



American species *H. carolina* and *H. monticola* are well represented in British cultivation, the latter, especially in its variety *vestita* which sometimes has pink-flushed flowers (forma *rosea*), being marginally more popular because of its larger flowers. It also makes a larger tree, especially in the wild where specimens 24–30m (80–100ft) are recorded, although a tree of 16m (52ft) is the current champion in Britain.

Of the remaining two silverbells, *H. parviflora*, a rare species in the wild, is just as rarely grown here and because of its supposedly inferior merit is unlikely to replace *H. carolina* and *H. monticola*, which are better garden plants anyway. That leaves *H. diptera* which, as the name suggests, differs from all others in its two-winged fruits. This last species is uncommon in British cultivation where it makes a large shrub, 2.5–4.5m (8–15ft) high, or a small tree. It is perhaps the species most suited in size to the smaller garden but is also less reliable in flowering and not entirely hardy in colder areas of Britain.

There is, however, a variety of *H. diptera* called *magniflora* (large-flowered), which though relatively unknown in British cultivation is proving, where it does grow, to be a far better garden plant. A plant in the Sir Harold Hillier Gardens and Arboretum near Romsey in Hampshire has grown to 5 × 7m (16 × 23ft) since it was planted around 1970 and in May floods its branches with glorious white flowers. These are around twice the size of the typical tree, from 2–3cm long.

Its more reliable performance here is probably due to its habitat in the wild. Typical *H. diptera* occurs in flood plain woodland in South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama and Texas, while var. *magniflora* with a more restricted distribution in northern Florida and eastern Alabama is found in deciduous woodlands of upland or ravine slopes.

How the variety *magniflora* came to be in British cultivation is not recorded, although the Hillier plant (three were originally planted) originated in the Arboretum Kalmthout, Belgium, where there is a twin-stemmed specimen of 10m (33ft). This was already flourishing in 1952 when Robert and George de Belder bought the property, soon to be joined by Jelena (of *Hamamelis* fame) who became Robert's wife. The site was then occupied by a small, badly neglected arboretum planted in 1857 by Charles van Geest, an Antwerp nurseryman, and carried on by Antoine Kort. The only nursery record remaining dating from 1929, simply lists the *Halesia* as a new introduction.

In the arboretum of the Vilmorin family at Verriers-le-Buisson near Paris grows another *Halesia* originally catalogued as *H. diptera*, but which M de Belder believes also to be *magniflora*. It could well be that there are further old introductions of this splendid snowbell in Continental

The Revd Dr Stephen Hales 1677-1761, after whom *Halesia* was named by Linnaeus, was noted for his important experiments in plant physiology

RHS

estates, masquerading, perhaps, as *H. diptera*.

Given its undoubted merit there seems no reason why it should not be made better known. According to master propagator Peter Dummer, recently retired from the Hillier Nurseries, it can be increased by grafting (on to *H. carolina* or *H. monticola*), seed, layering or soft-wood cuttings.

No less fascinating is the origin of the generic name *Halesia*, named in honour of the Revd Dr Stephen Hales which means that the generic name is correctly pronounced *Hale*-sia, not Hal-*ee*-sia as is normal in gardening circles. According to Professor Stearn (*A Gardener's Dictionary of Plant Names*), Hales (1677-1761), curate of Teddington, near London, was a physiologist, chemist and inventor whose wide-ranging curiosity resulted in important and far-reaching experiments in plant physiology as well as, possibly, the first measurement of blood pressure. Gardeners may well wonder what connection this extraordinary man and his experiments had to do with a beautiful flowering tree from America. The answer is probably none but Linnaeus, who established the genus and named the first (type) species *H. carolina* in 1759 (two years before Hales' death), was persuaded to honour him thus at the behest of London merchant John Ellis, one of his correspondents. Ellis (1705-1770), who knew Hales and admired his work, was a Fellow of the Royal Society and an accomplished naturalist, botanist and gardener. He corresponded with many notable botanists and horticulturists of his day, including Dr Alexander Garden of Charleston, South Carolina from whom he received in 1756 the original specimens and plants of *Halesia carolina*.

Those wishing to grow the snowbells will find them relatively easy, enjoying most a well-drained soil that does not dry out in summer. Although woodland trees in the wild, they flower best here given a sheltered but sunny position.

My thanks to the following friends who kindly provided me with information for this article: Robert de Belder, Allen Coombes (Sir Harold Hillier Gardens and Arboretum), Peter Dummer, Harry van Trier (Arboretum Kalmthout) and Marilyn Ward (Kew Library).

□ **Roy Lancaster, VMH,** *plantsman, lecturer, writer and broadcaster, is a member of the RHS Floral Committee B. He has introduced many plants to cultivation from his travels abroad, especially from China.*