

Some plant portraits from the island Kunashir

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Kunashir is the most southern island in the long chain of the volcanic Kuriles. It is about 125 kilometers long, 5-25 km wide and means, in translation, "black island," probably due to the dark conifer forests. It is an ancient Japanese area but has been part of Russia since 1945. The main geographical features are the volcanoes—Tyatya, 1822 m; Mendeleyevo, 895 m; Golovnino, 547 m (all active); and Rurui, 1486 m (not active)—and the numerous hot sulfur springs and fumarole fields on their slopes. The northern part of Kunashir is completely covered by the primeval forests with no roads or paths and no settlements. The forests also dominate in the southern part, but here there are considerable open areas, areas covered by bamboo, some roads, and some military and fishermen's settlements.

The most important plant on the island is *Sasa*, the Kurile bamboo. The Russian botanists have set apart 3-7 species, but this is problematical. *Sasa* grows everywhere, in open spaces and under the forests, differing in height from 0.5 m to nearly 3 meters, forming thickets difficult to get through. The habit is a little like our common reed, *Phragmites*, only stiffer and with broader leaves. *Sasa* hides many secrets and keeps vast areas unexplored. The people use only narrow paths through the bamboo and nobody wants to walk to the side. There is a thick springy mattress of dead leaves and stems on the ground under the bamboo which keeps the soil temperature and humidity very stable. It makes a suitable medium for the roots of various trees, shrubs and perennials. *Sasa* spreads with underground shoots; the seeds are mostly not viable.

A new and exotic feature for us is the abundance of climbers. Among them the most common and beautiful is *Hydrangea petiolaris*, forming in some way regular columns of spirally twining stems with leaves on different planes around

the mighty tree trunks. The flower-corymbs bring a horizontal line onto this plant. The older plants climb high into the heads of the trees and spread there freely. Very similar, but more rare, is *Schizophragma hydrangeoides*.

Rhus orientalis is a very common plant around here, creeping on the ground and climbing up the trees. With its trifoliate leaves on the white birch trunks, it makes an attractive plant. It is said to be poisonous and gives rise to burns on touch. The local people call this plant "ipritua." Some more climbers from Kunashir: *Actinidia arguta*, *A. kolomikta*, *A. polygama*, *Celastrus strigillosus*, *Schizandra chinensis* and *Vitis coignetiae*.

The Mendeleyevo volcano offered many pleasant and exciting acquaintances. I found *Gaultheria miqueliana* on the northwestern slopes. With its profusion of white fruits it is easy to recognize, like a snowberry on the ground. It grows on the bare volcanic scoria at the edges of the fumarole fields with *Pinus pumila*, *Sasa* sp., *Ledum palustre* var. *diversipilosum* (*L. macrophyllum*), *Empetrum* sp., and *Miscanthus sinensis* in quite open places.

Right at the top of the volcano (ca. 900 m) grow several plants in the fissures and crevices of the volcanic rocks. *Diapensia obovata*, most uncommon for me, is systematically so close to the familiar and beloved primulas and yet so different. It grows on the vertical surfaces of the rocks facing to the north, a tight hummock of little evergreen leaves, solitary whitish flowers and brownish capsules with tiny seeds.

Another amazing plant here is *Cassiope lycopodioides*, a delicate little plant in all its parts, clinging to the bare rock where there is more moisture and shade. How nice to meet *Rhododendron aureum* between *Pinus pumila* and the rocky outcrops. *Rhododendron camtschaticum* grows here also, but it is not so prominent. The conditions up there are quite special, which makes the cultivation of these plants difficult: constantly cool environment, good air and ground drainage, and a minimum of organic matter around the roots.

For the botanist, the most desirable place on Kunashir is the area of the Golovnino caldera. You could spend many days, weeks, and months here and still find things of interest. *Magnolia hypoleuca*, here in its northern limit, is worthy of a special expedition. It grows mainly in the southwestern part of



Magnolia hypoleuca with *Abies sachalinensis*. Photographed near Takibue bridge, Shikutsu, Hokkaido, Japan in November, 1992.

the island on the slopes towards the Kunashir Strait. You can recognize it without any hesitation by its whorls of big, obovate leaves and smooth, light gray trunk. The young trees and those grown in too little light are not eye catching, but the old trees are really exotic and admirable. I didn't succeed in taking a picture of the whole tree so dense is the forest, so steep the slopes and so uneven the light. And everywhere in your way the bamboo. This magnolia grows in the mixed forests with the *Quercus* sp., *Kalopanax pictus*, *Abies mayriana*, *Picea jezoensis*, *Betula ulmifolia*, *Acer ukurunduense* and *A. pictum* with an understory of *Viburnum furcatum*, *Euonymus macroptera*, *Rhus trichocarpa*, *Menziesia pentandra* and *Sasa* sp.

Clintonia udensis was a pleasant surprise for me. Such a prominent plant in such deep shade under the conifers (*Abies mayriana*, *Picea jezoensis*); the lush rosette of leaves with the attractive blue berries on a 50 cm high stem. The neighbors: *Maianthemum camtschaticum*, *Chimaphila japonica*, *Crematris variabilis*, *Gastrodia elata*, *Matteuccia orientalis* and others. Should be a valuable plant for the woodland garden in deep shade.

Here, some steps apart in a little more light, you can find more "woodlanders" like *Trillium camtschaticense*, *Polygonatum maximoviczii* and *Cardiocrinum cordatum*.

The caldera of Golovnino had two hot water caves inside. By now the water in the larger cave is cold, but in many places the hot, sulfur steam rises from the ground like the smoke from a chimney. On the sandy lake shore grows the low form of *Lilium pensylvanicum* (*L. dahuricum*) and on the inner slopes of the caldera, mixed with bamboo, grows *Leucothoe grayana*, whose leaves had started to turn dark purple.

The surroundings of the Golovnino caldera are the northern limits for many species. On the slopes towards the Kunashir Straits I found several bushes of *Lonicera chrysantha* with a profusion of bright red berries and *Morus bombycis*, a small tree with large leaves and tortuous branches. Right in the caldera the small leaved *Rhododendron tcschonokii*, like a bonsai. I didn't succeed in finding *Rhododendron brachycarpum*, and I was surprised to hear from the local nature protection workers that they knew of only four bushes on the island, all in separate places! From them I heard also about one *Cryptomeria japonica* tree (probably planted) and about

the colony of *Daphniphyllum humile* on the northern part of the island.

Cornus canadensis, *Ilex rugosa*, *Skimmia repens*, and *Vaccinium praestans* make up an association growing in the shady mossy mixed woods under the *Abies mayriana*, *Picea jezoensis*, *Taxus cuspidata*, *Acer ukurunduense*, *Sorbus commixta*, *Menziesia pentandra* and others. *Cornus canadensis* forms a good ground cover and is especially showy in fruit. *Ilex rugosa* was a little disappointment for me with its relatively small leaves and sparse growing habit. The flowers are tiny and the fruits small. This disappointment was compensated by the beauty of *Skimmia repens*, also an evergreen shrub with bigger leaves and bigger, bright red fruits in panicles. *Vaccinium praestans*, in my mind, is associated with the big mossy boulders. The main value of this plant is the big red fruits with a special taste and scent. The local people appreciate these fruits very much, and the scent of red bilberries dominates the local market in autumn.

Lysichiton camtschatcense is a plant difficult to overlook. It flowers early like calla with the big white wing-like flower in the water and forms, afterwards, a rosette of huge ovate leaves about 1 meter long always in the water or at a wet place, preferably in the shade.

Some plants on the sandy seashore caught my eye with their peculiarity: *Carex macrocephala*—with strange prickly seed heads on a strong low stem right from the pure sand, *Glehnia littoralis*—a low (10 cm) hairy and felty umbellate plant. *Senecio pseudoarnica* stays in my mind with the big golden yellow inflorescence and the fleshy leaves. *Rosa rugosa* is very common along the shore line.

The cliffs above the Pacific Ocean serve as a suitable place for *Aquilegia flabellata*, here much smaller than in our gardens; *Primula fauriei*—a little delicate primrose with yellowish farina under the leaves; *Potentilla megalantha*—an outstanding cinquefoil with big golden flowers and hairy, gray leaves. On the wet rocks is a good place for *Saxifraga fortunei*, whose leaves form a good green round-jagged mosaic.

It was too short a time to make an acquaintance. It was more like a glimpse from the keyhole into the luxurious palace. The treatment of the plants was largely casual, led by chance and my sympathies.

In conclusion I must say there are no aboriginal people in Kunashir, no people with roots, no people who really care about the wonderful and unique island. People come and go to make money, to wear the gun, to catch the fish. The Russians left nothing from the Japanese era, and the Japanese will leave nothing from the Russian era—the shed-like houses, the rusty shipwrecks and the military castoffs are not worth it. Let us hope for better days for Kunashir! ✻

Urmaz Kaja visited Kunashir in September, 1991. Mr. Kaja writes from his home in Estonia. A special thank you to Lennarth Jonsson for suggesting to Mr. Kaja that he share his expedition with the members of the Magnolia Society.

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