

Arisaema in the wild

Roy Lancaster describes seven species, rare, if at all in cultivation.

In the January 1981 issue of *The Garden*, Andrew Henderson gave a charming account of the various aroids cultivated in English gardens. Among them he described several species of *Arisaema*, pointing out that the majority of species (over one hundred are known) are not at present in cultivation. During travels in the Himalayas and in western China, I have had the pleasure of seeing a number of arisaemas in wild situations and the following notes therefore may be of interest to those who grow these fascinating plants.

To begin with, I should say that the majority of plants I have seen appeared to enjoy open places such as forest margins, open hillsides and woodland clearings, often growing from between rocks or in patches of scrub at altitudes between 9,000 and 12,500ft (2750- 3800m).

Arisaema consanguineum, included by Chinese authorities under *A. erubescens*, I saw in September 1981, growing in the valley of the Pa La River, south-west of Kangding in Sichuan, western China. It was not uncommon by tracks, on banks and by forest margins, sometimes growing from between boulders and crudely built stone walls even. These plants were robust 18in. to 2ft high (45 - 60cm), with a long-stalked, large single leaf, composed of 14 to 16 narrow, long pointed leaflets. The fruits were green and unripe, borne in a large conical head on a drooping stalk. Later these turn to orange then red as I once saw many years ago in the garden of Mr. Frank Waley at Sevenoaks. It is still in cultivation and is a bold species. The flowers: are generally greenish in colour

During the Sino-British Expedition to Cangshan (Dali Mountains) in western Yunnan in spring 1981 we found several notable *Arisaema* species in flower.

Arisaema elephas was easily the most unusual and fascinating. The flower appeared at the same time or just ahead of the large trifoliate leaf. In colour it was white or greenish white, heavily striped deep purple, completely purple in the upper part. From within the flower emerged an extraordinarily long spadix which hung or curved to the ground like some obscene purple, whip-like tongue. The flower rarely stood more than 18in. high (45cm) and yet in some specimens, the spadix extended for at least as long. *A. elephas* grew in the leaf litter in shady gullies or by streamsides in the forest and, as far as I am aware, has never been in cultivation.

By contrast, *A. echinatum* was an almost all green plant. The erect stems to 18in. (45cm) bore a slender almost tubular flower, the spathe erect, ending in a long tail-like point which, like the margin of the spathe was purple. The leaf, as in *A. consanguineum* was composed of a long stalk bearing numerous long pointed leaflets much narrower than those of any other species seen. It was common in woodland and appeared clean cut and elegant compared with most others. As far as I know it has never been in cultivation.

By far the most commonly seen species in the Cangshan was *A. nepenthoides*, an erect species with flowers varying in colour between individuals. Mostly they appeared in appealing candy-striped combinations of green, pink or rose and white on a darkly mottled stem 18in. to 2ft. tall (45 - 60cm). The leaves were composed usually of five substantial leaflets. In common with several others, this species has a wide distribution and I remember finding it on several occasions in the mountains of east Nepal in 1971 and 1973. There it often grows among clumps of *Daphne bholua* on the edge of forest as well as in hillside scrub. I am not aware of this species in cultivation though seed has been introduced from Nepal on numerous occasions.

We saw several other, as yet unidentified species in Yunnan including one which, in the opinion of Mr Simon Mayo of the RBG Kew, may be a new species. This was found in a shady stream gully at the northern end of the Cangshan. It differed from all others we had seen in the boldly toothed

or lobed leaflets and in the extra ordinarily well developed ear-like lobes on the green, darkly spotted spathe.

Visitors to Kashmir are probably familiar with at least two of its native arisaemas which. from my experience are particularly common among the boulder strewn alpine pastures above Gulmarg. Here grows what must be one of the most elegant species in *A. jacquemontii*. The long tubular flowers are green with paler stripes ending in a long, slender, tail-like point. The spadix is equally long and slender and curves smoothly out of the tube. The leaves are bold and lush, composed of five leaflets. The plant is 14 to 18in. high (35 - 45cm), the taller specimens usually being those in shady or protected situations.

Arisaema propinquum (wallichianum) is a bolder plant with larger coarser leaves composed of three Leaflets. The flowers are white or green-tinted. striped blackish purple and curve forward and downward in the upper part. Sometimes these last two species may be found growing together in the same clump. As far as I am aware, neither are in cultivation, unless they are represented in the collection of a specialist.