

# SHORTIA

## A NEWSLETTER OF THE WESTERN CAROLINA BOTANICAL CLUB

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## THE HISTORY OF SHORTIA REVIEWED

Several years ago typed copies of the history of the discoveries of Shortia in Western North Carolina were distributed to our members. Verna and I copied this interesting history from Chapter 4 in a book edited by Roderick Peattie titled "The Great Smokies and the Blue Ridge." In this chapter, written by Peattie's younger brother Donald, is a section "The History of Shortia, the Lost Flower."

For the benefit of new members I should like to repeat a condensation of this informative article; and for a disclosure to us all, I want to include the previously unpublished account of Shortia found growing near Marion by Asa Gray.

In his account of Shortia's history, Donald Peattie tells of the confirmed reports of Andre Michaux's finding the unknown plant, its rediscovery ninety-eight years later by Sargent in the same locality, and then telling of his own similar experience at a later date.

Reading Peattie's article, one learns that Andre Michaux came to Charleston, South Carolina in 1781 when he was 40 years old. In June of that year he explored some of the up-country of North Carolina. But it was on his second trip to America in December of 1788 that he collected a small branch and fruit pod of an unknown plant in the North Carolina mountains. This specimen was deposited in the herbarium in Paris together with a single note that it came from the "high mountains of Carolina." It gathered dust there for half a century until young Asa Gray and John Torrey went to Paris to see all America-type specimens in Europe.

"I have discovered a new genus," Gray records on April 8, 1839, "in Michaux's herbarium--at the end, among the plantae ignotae. It is from that great unknown region, the high mountains of North Carolina. I claim the right of a discoverer to affix the name. So I say, as this is a good North American genus and comes from near Kentucky, it shall be christened Shortia." Dr. Charles Wilkins Short was a fine pioneer botanist of the Bluegrass State.

So Shortia was described in botanical manuals of the time--always with the baffling statement: "flowers unknown."

In the meantime Dr. Gray had set out at the first possible moment after his return to America in the summer of 1840 to search for it. He made his headquarters at Jefferson in Ashe County, North Carolina, and searched far and wide--all in vain. He could have no idea that he was more than one hundred miles from Michaux's original station or type locality, nor that he was hunting for it in the wrong season and at the wrong altitude.

In the meantime Dr. Gray had discovered in an old Japanese herbal the picture of a plant that unmistakably was a shortia, and so there at last he beheld a picture, at least, of the flowers. So Dr. Gray's prediction which he had made for the form of the flower based on the structure of the seed pod, was borne out. Shortia, it was evident, must be a member of the same family as galax.

The search caught the fancy of young Charles Sprague Sargent of Brookline, Massachusetts, the future director of the Arnold Arboretum and America's greatest authority on trees. He turned back to Michaux's original diary which reads in part:



"Dec. 11, 1788... I came back to camp with my guide at the head of the Keowee and gathered a large quantity of the low woody plants with the saw-toothed leaves that I found the day I arrived. I did not see it on any other mountain. The Indians of the place told me that the leaves had a good taste when chewed and the odor was agreeable when they were crushed, which I found to be the case.

"Directions for finding this plant: The head of the Keowee is the junction of two considerable torrents which flow from cascades from the high mountains. This junction is made in a little plain which was formerly a city or village of the Cherokees. In descending to the junction of the two torrents, having the river at the left and the high mountains which look to the north on the right, one finds at about thirty to fifty paces from the confluence a little path formed by the Indian hunters. Continuing in this direction one arrives at last at the mountains where one finds this little shrub which covers the soil along with *Epigaea repens*." (Trailing arbutus)

Then in the autumn of 1886, just ninety-eight years after Michaux had written the passage above, Sargent found himself in the Toxaway country with its steep-gabled high ridges drenched much of the time in rains, and its plunging stream valleys perpetually shaded by dense rhododendron thickets. "Would I were with you," wrote the aged Dr. Gray. "I can only say, 'Crown yourself with glory by discovering the original habitat of Shortia.'" Gray's letter arrived in the evening mail, just as the botanists were emptying out their vascula after the day's collecting. Dr. Sargent produced a strange leaf and passed it over to one of his companions with a query. "Why, that's Shortia, of course," was the joking answer--which proved no joke at all.

Now the author Donald Peattie relates his own discovery experience several years later:

"Perhaps the author can best describe where Shortia was found again by a reference to his own notes, for the day that I discovered Shortia was like that when Sargent came upon it, torrentially rainy. I had walked all the way from Tryon to Toxaway in fine weather. Now I was soaked to the skin by a downpour and driven to take shelter in a mountain farmhouse.

"I had no reason to think that my host knew the Latin names of plants when I asked him: 'I don't suppose you know of a flower around here called Shortia?' Even the smallest of his children from the other side of the stove chorused a scornful, 'Of course we know Shortia!'"

"Why, boasted my host, he guessed he had more Shortia on his land than anybody else in the country, and there didn't many people got any, because it was the durndest rare flower God ever made."

"My host invited me freely to take all of his Shortia I wanted--which was very little--and gave me minute directions for finding the trail (perhaps the same that Michaux followed, almost certainly so, indeed). The rain having momentarily abated, I set out according to directions expecting to have a steep ascent, and found myself going down, and down, and down...."

"According to my map I must now be down to about fifteen hundred feet, and well inside South Carolina. I realized at last how Gray and others were misled by Michaux's note 'high mountains of Carolina.' He didn't say on the high mountains. He meant to say among the high mountains. The heavy forest was utterly silent and lonely, and I could hear another downpour coming through the woods, with a sizzling sound, and see the veil of rain water trailing swiftly toward me.

"And then, suddenly, right under my feet, spreading far as I could see under the rhododendron, growing on the steep bank with leaves of galax and partridgeberry, I beheld the long-sought-for little flower, its round leaves beginning to curtsy, and its frail sweet bells to swing under the first pelting of the rain. I set a trowel under a plant of it and just as the rain smote my face, I lifted from the sour soil a living Shortia galacifolia!"

So far it has not been revealed that Asa Gray ever saw Shortia growing in a natural habitat. But recently several sources have revealed that Gray did see Shortia growing in North Carolina, although miles from the location of Michaux's discovery.

Professor Earl L. Core\* of West Virginia University, discloses that Shortia was found growing on the banks of the Catawba River near Marion by a young native named George Hyams. Hyams sent a specimen to Dr. Gray who said: "Now let me sing my nunc dimittis." Nothing would do now but a pilgrimage to Shortia in 1870. The aging Gray and his party arrived too late to see the rare flower but they saw the plant in its natural habitat and had another gay and strenuous season of tramping through the mountains of North Carolina. Gray made one final short journey in 1884 to North Carolina and his beloved Roan Mountain. He died June 30, 1888.

Bringing this part of the Shortia story up to date is our friend Carter Hudgins of Marion who confirms that the Shortia Gray saw is still vigorously thriving.

\* Additionally reported in Asa Gray by A. Hunter Dupree; Harvard Press 1959

#### Addendum

A letter dated March 3, 1981 from Jimmy Massey, Curator of the herbarium at Chapel Hill, confirms that they have specimens of Shortia from McDowell County (Marion area) showing flowering dates of March 23 and April 1. So our scheduled trip on March 27 this year should be about on target.



IDENTIFICATION OF LEAVES--  
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From left to right

-Top Row-

White Oak  
Red Maple  
Locust  
Sweet Gum

-Second Row-

Silver Bell  
Tulip Tree  
Sourwood  
Hickory

-Third Row-

Ash  
Red Oak  
Sassafras  
Linden

-Fourth Row-

Cherry  
Dogwood  
Sugar Maple  
Buckeye

ELECTED OFFICERS

At the Annual Meeting held Friday, January 30, the following officers of your club were duly nominated and unanimously elected to serve during 1981:

President	-	August Kehr
Vice President	-	Sam Childs
Secretary	-	Margaret Canfield
Treasurer	-	Margaret Kuhn

EXCERPTS FROM THE HISTORIAN'S REPORT  
(John Kuhn)

We had 37 flower trips, two of them included extra activities. One was the pot luck supper at Camenzinds interesting estate, (with its gracious hosts) attended by 48 hungry people. It is always a pleasure to attend a gathering there and we all wish to express our appreciation to Peggy and Enno.

The other pot luck, or covered dish, was at Holmes State Park where 51 were present. Those numbers tell a story the scheduling committee should take note of. This Club likes to eat.

We had one trip to the Asheville Botanical Gardens to eradicate some pesky weeds.

On September 15 there was a hike at Holmes State Forest. Miles Peelle gave a talk on Survivors, Hangers-on, and Odd Balls of the Botanical World.

Our longest trip, an overnight, was to Bluff Mountain. The round trip was 325 miles. Thirty-two people attended. We saw about 30 flowers in bloom, and 2 interesting old churches at West Jefferson.

A stop was made at Moses Cone Estate off the Parkway, and another stop for a picnic lunch, with other stops at scenic spots on the Parkway on our return.

Per mile of travel equaled .092 flowers per mile.

The next longest trip was to Roan Mountain--176 miles. Twenty-four people saw 13 flowers in bloom, which equals .073 flowers per mile.

The best flower average was the Van Wingerden Greenhouses trip.

The attendance at the indoor meetings was 222 people, an average of 32 people. There were 7 meetings. Almost 1200 people turned out for our trips and hikes.

The most flowers seen on the trips or hikes was at Buck Springs Gap, led by Miles Peelle, the number being 45. The same number were seen at Bear Wallow Mountain which was led by Lew Mains.