

Tree of the Month, May 2016: Monarch birch (*Betula maximowicziana*)

Monarch birch (*Betula maximowicziana*) is a large, majestic tree with creamy grey and pale orange, peeling bark. Its heart-shaped, serrated leaves are, at 12 cm long by 10 cm wide, the largest of any birch species. In early spring, male catkins, up to 12 cm long, appear with the leaves. A mature monarch birch can reach 30 m tall.

Betula maximowicziana is native to Japan and the nearby Kuril Islands of Russia. It is an important timber tree in Japan, where it is also grown as an ornamental. VanDusen's monarch birch was grown from seed collected in the wild near Nikko, Japan, and sent to us as a seedling by the US National Arboretum in 1978. Despite being attractive, drought tolerant and resistant to birch borer, monarch birch is rare in cultivation outside of Japan.

The species was named for Karl Ivanovich Maximovich (1827-1891), a Russian botanist who became the Curator of the Herbarium at Saint Petersburg Botanical Gardens in 1852, and was promoted to Director in 1869. He visited China, Korea and Japan from 1859-1864. He did a lot of plant collecting in Japan, and had an assistant named Sukawa Chonosuke, for whom Maximovich named a flower, *Trillium tschonoskii*, and a maple, *Acer tschonoskii*.

The name *Betula maximowicziana* was chosen by Eduard August von Regel (1815-1892), a German horticulturist and botanist who was the Director of the Saint Petersburg Botanical Garden from 1875-1892. During his career Regel named and described over 3000 plants that were sent to him by naturalists and explorers.