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PLANT PORTRAIT

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1138. *Salix magnifica* Hemsl.

Salicaceae

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Summary

Salix magnifica Hemsl. (Salicaceae) is illustrated and its full description is given. The history of this willow in cultivation and its distribution are discussed. Morphological characteristics of infraspecific taxa are compared and their distinction given. Two new combinations are made. The names of two taxa are lectotypified. Information about the cultivation of *S. magnifica* is provided.

INTRODUCTION

Of all the 350–450 species of the genus *Salix* L. known to date (Belyaeva & Govaerts, 2023; POWO, 2025) only one has earned the name MAGNIFICENT WILLOW for its unusually beautiful appearance, in all stages of its development (Plate 1138, and see figures). In winter, *Salix magnifica* Hemsl. has attractive smooth and shiny brownish purple shoots, with conspicuous buds from late summer until spring, when long female and male catkins up to 23 cm appear, the latter having beautifully coloured reddish-yellow anthers (Figures 1,2,3). In summer its large leaves, up to 24 cm long and 15 cm wide, are reminiscent of *Ficus* or *Magnolia* leaves. Even botanists find it difficult to identify this plant as a willow at first glance, when it has only buds and developed leaves.

Salix magnifica was described in 1906 by William Botting Hemsley in the *Bulletin of Miscellaneous Information*, *Royal Gardens, Kew*, based on the specimens collected by Ernest Henry Wilson on his expedition in western Szechuan (Sichuan), China (1903–1905). Wilson was collecting plants for Messrs. James Veitch & Sons (Hemsley, 1906; Wilson, 1913; Holway, 2018; Grabovskaya-Borodina et al., 2022). The first set of Wilson's collection was presented by Messrs. Veitch to the Herbarium at Kew. According to Rehder (1930), Wilson returned from western Sichuan to England in March 1905 and was temporarily working as an assistant in the Herbarium, Kew, sorting and identifying his herbarium collections and in January 1906 he accepted a position as botanical assistant at the Imperial Institute in London. Hemsley (1906) hoped that Wilson would collaborate with him in preparing a paper describing new species from China but, in the end, Wilson was too busy with other duties and could not

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FIGURE 1 Male catkins of *Salix magnifica*, 18 April 2024. Photo taken by Irina Belyaeva at Willow Mount, Lydbrook, UK.

fully complete his share of the work with Hemsley. Thus, in Hemsley's paper (1906) the names of 34 new taxa were published, 25 by Hemsley and Wilson and 9 by Hemsley alone. One of the latter was *S. magnifica*.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER *SALIX*

The relationships of *Salix magnifica* with other willows were discussed by A. K. Skvortsov (1989). His investigation of willows that grow in the mountains of Southwest China, an area renowned as a centre of old Tertiary relicts of deciduous flora, showed that some of these willows and especially those placed by Chou et al. (1984) into section *Magnificae* C.K.Schneid.



PLATE 1138 *Salix magnifica* CHRISTABEL KING



FIGURE 2 Female catkins of *Salix magnifica*, 18 April 2024. Photo taken by Irina Belyaeva at Willow Mount, Lydbrook, UK.

to which *S. magnifica*, the type of the section, belongs, are very close to the species of the section *Chamaetiae* Dumort. to which the arctic-alpine willow, *Salix reticulata* L., the type of the section, belongs. Skvortsov (1989) compared the morphological characters of both sections and concluded that, overall, the characteristics common to the *Magnificae* s.l. and *Chamaetiae* s.l. groups can be summarised as follows: shoots of restricted growth, with a limited number of leaves (up to about 10 per shoot). Gradation of bud shape and size from the "arctica" type (this term was introduced by Skvortsov in 1968; Skvortsov 1999). Very small stipules are rare; they are unusually completely reduced. The petioles vary in length, and their cross-section is distinctly grooved. The innervation of the leaf blade protrudes on the underside and is often depressed on the upper side. The inflorescences are located at the end of normally



FIGURE 3 Capsules of *Salix magnifica*, 18 April 2024. Photo taken by Irina Belyaeva at Willow Mount, Lydbrook, UK.

leafy shoots; the uppermost leaf of such a shoot is fully developed (sometimes even the largest on the shoot) and bears a fully developed bud in its axil. Flowering is late: simultaneous with the foliation of the shoots. Catkins (especially male) are stout, loosely flowered, flowers arranged almost vertically. Flower bracts are thin-membranous, pale or light brownish, occasionally tinged with purple, often somewhat concave, blunt or truncated, glabrous or hairy. Nectaries are usually two (less often only one in each flower), often lobed. Stamens are short (2–4 mm long), anthers are rounded, small (approximately 0.4–0.5 mm long). Capsules are short-stalked or sessile, small (4–5 mm long at maturity), glabrous or hairy. Styles are moderately long or short. Stigmas are laterally bent, very short (approximately 0.2–0.4 mm long). Seeds per capsule are approximately 8–15.

INTRODUCTION TO CULTIVATION

Soon after *Salix magnifica* was described by Hemsley a short note on this willow (Bourguignon, 1906) was published in *Revue Horticole* which announced that the botanical explorations of Mr. E. H. Wilson in western Sichuan (China) had enriched horticulture with a new remarkable willow distinct from the rest of the genus. A few similar notes on the underlying specific features of MAGNIFICENT WILLOW and its value for horticulture were published soon afterwards by Léveillé (1909), Gibbs (1912), Grignan (1913), Mottet (1915), Schneider (1917) and Kache (1919).

The most valuable and useful information was reported by the collector of this new willow himself (Wilson, 1913), who noted in his travel journal that *Salix magnifica* was "the commonest shrub of the day," "which is abundant everywhere, but more especially near watercourses." He called this willow extraordinary, in that it "forms a straggling bush 5 to 20 feet tall and, except when in flower or fruit, would scarcely be taken even by the closest observer for a Willow." He also shared in this publication the information that he first discovered this plant in 1903, and in 1908 succeeded in introducing living female and male plants into cultivation, although Rehder (1927) and Krüssmann (1978) mentioned the year of introduction as 1903 without giving evidence for this date. W. J. Bean (1914) mentioned that Wilson discovered this willow in 1903 in the mountains of Sichuan at 9000 ft., but it was not introduced at that time. After his second visit to Sichuan in 1908, Wilson sent cuttings of *Salix magnifica* to the Arnold Arboretum, where Bean saw the plant in 1910 and obtained living material for Kew Gardens, where the progeny of this willow is still cultivated.

There are a few herbarium specimens of *Salix magnifica* from cultivation in the Kew herbarium. One of them, K004766443 (Figure 4), combines two collections by Bean from the plant which was cultivated in the arboretum of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. There are two fragments mounted on the same herbarium sheet: one with leaves dated 1st August 1911 and another with a male catkin dated 11th May 1916, both marked as "1041 W. 650.10. Arn. Arb." The cultivated plant originated from the male plant collected by Wilson under number 1041, which Bean brought in 1910 from the Arnold Arboretum. On the label on the right is a description of this plant written by Bean (Figure 4). There is also a note written by Wilson attached to this specimen that says that this willow was introduced in 1909 from cuttings and living plants, but herbarium material with fruits was collected in July 1903. The second herbarium specimen of *S. magnifica*, K004766444, cultivated at the Arboretum of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, contains a fragment with male catkins, Accession No. 069–87.00477, collected 16th May 1983, identified by R. D. Meikle, originated from Sichuan, Wenhuan Co., adjacent Mupin (Baoxing Co.), 1900–2000 m, 11-12th February 1981. The third herbarium specimen of *S. magnifica*, K004766441, is a duplicate from the collection of cultivated plants of the University of British Columbia. The text on the label reads: "Deciduous tree ca. 3 m. tall, cultivated in Asian Garden, Vancouver, BC. Female. Garden # 23877-368-84. 18 October 1988. Coll. & Det. Gerald B. Straley 5150." It seems that this collection has not survived in that garden (D. Justice, pers. comm. April 2025).

Other specimens from cultivation examined: V191773, ♀; CAN600330, ♀; AK376540 ♀; WAG1191154; WAG1191155, ♂; L1550635; L4168034, ♀; P05499233, ♂.

As an outstanding, beautiful plant, *Salix magnifica* has been cultivated in the United Kingdom (Newsholme, 2002; Edwards & Marshall, 2023) and other European countries (Krüssman, 1978). The first author has seen this willow in botanical gardens and private collections in Austria (Vienna), Germany (Berlin) and Switzerland (Geneva). *S. magnifica* was reported in cultivation in Belgium (Beveren, Bonheiden, Genk, Kalmthout, Sonja Deneve, pers. comm. 2025); Finland (Lagerström, Uronen, 2005: 150); France (Brochet, 2017); New Zealand (Glenny, 2022); Russia (Yekaterinburg, Olga V. Epanchintseva, 2025, pers. comm.) and the United Kingdom (Botanical Garden of Cambridge University, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew,

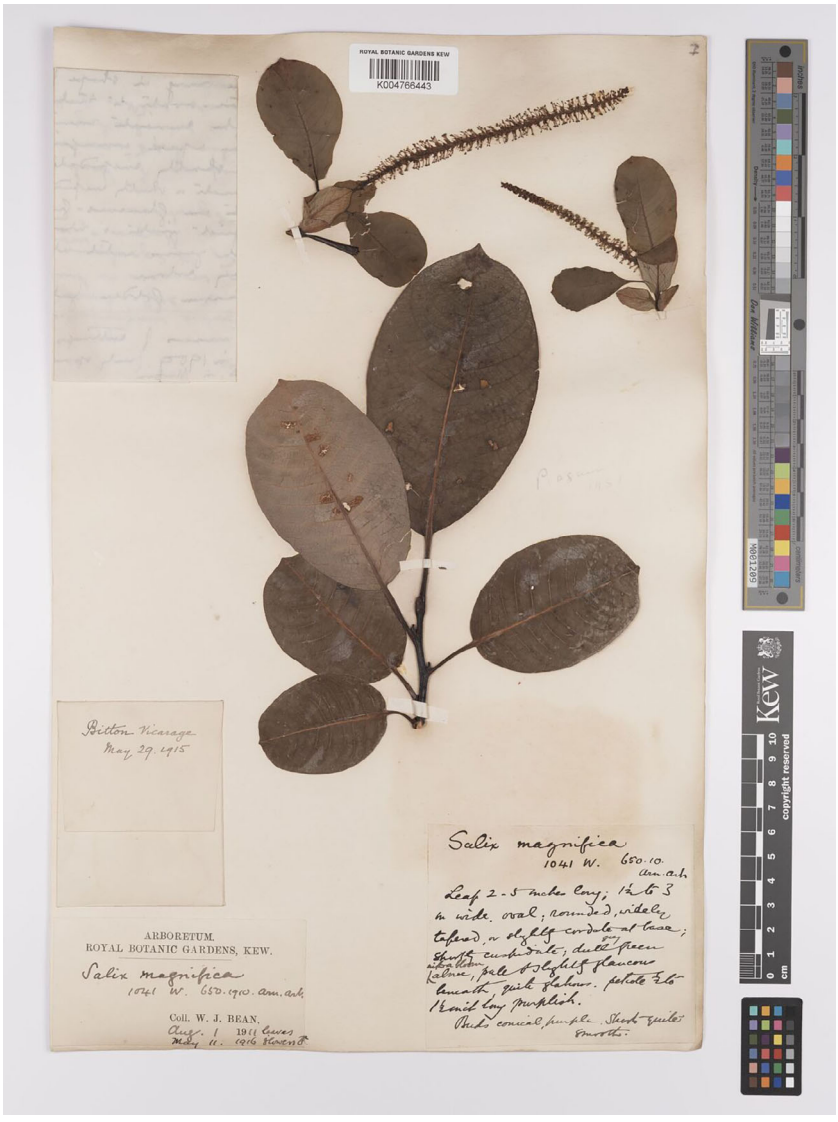


FIGURE 4 *Salix magnifica*. Specimen, K004766443: The first plant, cultivated at the Arboretum of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew introduced by W. J. Bean in 1910; a folded note written by the collector of this plant, E. H. Wilson, is visible top left. © The Board of Trustees of The Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew.

Rothamsted Research National Willow Collection, Valley Gardens of Windsor Great Park, Willow Mount private garden). Twelve suppliers mentioned on the Royal Horticultural Society's website offer this willow for sale in the UK, and online searches reveal other sources of *Salix magnifica* plants worldwide.

CULTIVATION

Salix magnifica is easy to grow, female and male plants having been cultivated and observed by IB in her private willow collection since 2006. Plants can be easily propagated from cuttings



FIGURE 5 *Salix magnifica* seedlings, 9 August 2023. Photo taken by Irina Belyaeva at Willow Mount, Lydbrook, UK.

and seeds. In its first year growing from seed a seedling will form a single stem (Figure 5), starting to branch and assume a shrubby form in its second year, becoming large enough to flower (Figure 6). It can be trained as a single-stemmed or multi-stemmed tree if propagated from a one-year-old shoot as a cutting.

Cuttings, 20–22 cm long, from one- or two-year-old shoots should be taken in October–November or in February–March when buds are not open. The cuts at the top and the bottom of a cutting should be made 1 cm above the top bud and 1 cm below the bottom bud perpendicular to the shoot. Cuttings are stood in water for 24 hours and then planted individually in 30 cm deep pots filled with a mixture of 3 parts of compost 1 part of coarse sand, leaving only the top bud above the soil level. They are watered well and left to root. Cuttings are watered periodically when the soil is dry.

Propagation by seeds is more difficult with only 40% of collected seeds germinating and surviving. Seeds should be collected when capsules in catkins are open in spring and immediately placed in a sterile plastic container filled with very moist sterile substrate (1 part compost and 3 parts coarse sand) covered with a sterile lid or placed in a sterile plastic bag. Seeds usually germinate in 24–48 hours. When seedlings have two proper leaves, they can be pricked out in separate small sterile pots, watered well and regularly until they are planted in the ground.

Salix magnifica (Figure 7) grows well in moist well-drained soil and it grows best in full sun but can tolerate partial shade. If needed, this willow can be pruned in late winter or early spring. Slow-release fertiliser should be applied in early spring if it grows on poor soil. Mulching is recommended with compost or bark chips which will suppress weeds and help to retain moisture. Young plants may need winter protection during frosty periods.

There are three known cultivars of artificial hybrids of *Salix magnifica*: both *Salix* 'Aegma Brno' and *Salix* 'Mamus Brno' are female clones from hybridisation of *S. aegyptiaca* L. and *S. magnifica*. The third female cultivar *Salix* 'Maerd Brno' is a hybrid of *S.* × *erdingeri* A.Kern. and *S. magnifica* (Newsholme, 2002).



FIGURE 6 A two year-old plant of *Salix magnifica* grown from seed, showing the development of branches during the second growing season. It is flowering as it comes into growth for its third season, 15 April 2025. Photo taken by Irina Belyaeva at Willow Mount, Lydbrook, UK.

Salix magnifica is a beautiful willow and has been used since its description as an unusual ornamental plant. It has quite large catkins and attracts many bees while in flower, so it is useful as an early nectar plant. As reported by D. Brochet (2017) it could be used for grafting of other ornamental willows which are difficult to propagate e.g. *S. caprea* f. *pendula* (T. Lang) Rehder or S. *cinerea* L. f. *tricolor* Dippel.



FIGURE 7 Habit of *Salix magnifica*, 19 June 2024. Photo taken by Irina Belyaeva at Willow Mount, Lydbrook, UK.

NOMENCLATURE

Salix magnifica Hemsl., Bull. Misc. Inform. Kew 5: 163 (1906). Type: China, western Sichuan, Muping, mountains 9000 ft. (2953 m), July 1903, 4526, ♀ (K: K000335168!) – lectotype, designated here by I. V. Belyaeva), isolectotypes: A00055957!, A00031179!, BM000958010!, K000335641! P00761055! Syntypes: China, western Sichuan, Muping, mountains 3000 m, June 1904, 4526, ♂ (A00055958!, BM000958011!, P00761056!). Herbarium codes follow Thiers (2024).

Protologue citation: Western Szechuan. Mountains, at about 2700 m, *Wilson*, 4526.

Note: Hemsley (1906: 163), when describing *S. magnifica*, mentioned in the protologue the collections by Wilson under the number 4526 and included in the description plants with male and female flowers.

Wilson (1913: 175) collected *Salix magnifica* in 1903 (female plant), 1904 (male plant) and 1908 (female and male plants) under the same number 4526, applying this number to the same taxon. However, only the two gatherings from 1903 and 1904 can be accepted as original material as they were collected before the date when *S. magnifica* was described by Hemsley.

Three herbarium specimens at K belong to the original material annotated by Hemsley as *Salix magnifica* with labels written by Wilson. The first specimen K000335168 (Figure 8), contains two fragments of a female plant marked by Hemsley as "Sheet i": one fragment above – floriferous shoot with mature catkin and leaves, the second fragment below with buds and leaves. This specimen is dated 7/03 [July 1903]. The second specimen, K000335641, was marked by Hemsley as "Sheet ii *Salix magnifica*, Hemsl. No 4526 Wilson", it contains three fragments, shoot with leaves, one leaf separated and turned over showing leaf surface below and separated mature female catkin with opened capsules. Hemsley's annotations show that both specimens belong to the same gathering. The third specimen, K000335167, has a printed label "Coll. E. H. Wilson, (for James Veitch & Sons). Western China N 4526, 6/04 [number and date in Wilson's handwriting] also belongs to the original material and contains one shoot with three male catkins and leaves, two separate leaves and a fragment of a mature female catkin in a little envelope, which does not belong to the same gathering but to the gathering collected by Wilson in July 1903. This specimen was annotated by Hemsley "*Salix magnifica* Hemsl. W.B.H." [William Botting Hemsley].

There are four duplicate specimens with female fragments of *Salix magnifica* (A00055957!, A00031179!, BM000958010!, P00761055!), collected and annotated by Wilson with the date July 1903 and three duplicate specimens (A00055958!, BM000958011!, P00761056!) with male fragments, collected and annotated by Wilson with the date June 1904. All specimens belong to the same taxon, correspond to the protologue, are part of the original material but they belong to two gatherings collected at different dates from the same location. Female plants were collected in July 1903 and male plants in June 1904.

C. K. Schneider (1916) mentioned that he had seen only two specimens and mentioned as "types in part", citing female and male plants, collected under the same number 4526 but at different dates, July 1903 and June 1904 accordingly. Although Hao (1936) mentioned both gatherings as types: "Szechuan: Mupin, mountains, alt. 2700–3000 m, Wilson 4525 (type ♂♀ in Herb. Kew)", he did not make a lectotypification according to the current International Code of Nomenclature (ICN, Turland et al., 2018) as they mentioned, as types, two different gatherings with male and female flowers, collected in different years, and Schneider did not specify in which Institution these "types" are located. Thus, all specimens of the same gathering are syntypes according to Art. 9.6. of the ICN (Turland et al., 2018).

The specimen K000335168 is selected here as the lectotype (Figure 8) as it was seen and annotated by Hemsley before the name, *Salix magnifica*, was published by him, it is a female specimen in good condition.

For the following description, not only living plants in cultivation were used but also herbarium specimens of cultivated plants as listed in the section on cultivation as well as herbarium specimens of plants collected in the wild and listed below.

Other specimens of *Salix magnifica* from the wild examined: BRIT907416, ♀; E01275750–E01275754; F2280700 ♀; F2280803 ♀; K005138691♀; K005138692; K005138693 ♂; K005138694 ♀; K000335166 ♀; P00781807 ♂; W299507 ♂.



FIGURE 8 Lectotype of *Salix magnifica*. © The Board of Trustees of The Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew.

DESCRIPTION

Salix magnifica f. ***magnifica***

A *shrub* or small *tree*, 2–7.5 m. *Branches* straight, thick, not flexible, greyish brown. *Branchlets* straight, greenish brown, brownish purple or reddish purple, glabrous, glossy, with pale noticeable lenticels,18–23 cm long, 5–12 mm in diameter at the base on female plants and 19–28 cm long, 7–13 mm in diameter at the base on male plants. *Buds* monomorphic, "arctica" type (Skvortsov, 1968; Skvortsov, 1999), reddish-brown to purple, glabrous, conical, not carinate, declined from the shoot at an angle more than 50°; 4–7 per one year old shoot, with round apex, 5–9 × 4–7 mm and 4–7 mm thick on female plants; and 5–9 per one year old shoot, with acute apex, 8–13 × 5–8 mm and 4–5 mm thick on male plants. *Petiole* deeply grooved adaxially,

rigid, to 4 cm long, reddish, glabrous, not glandular. *Leaves* alternate, juvenile leaves reddish, glabrous or sometimes villous with yellowish or ferruginous hairs abaxially becoming glabrous, leathery when mature, green adaxially, dull and glaucous abaxially, amphistomatous, not blackening or sometimes blackening on drying, narrowly obovate, oval or slightly obovate with entire, flat or slightly revolute, irregularly dotted glandular margin, to 24 × 15 cm, with rounded or subcordate, rarely broadly cuneate or attenuate base, apex short, rounded, obtuse, mucronate, or acute, flat; veins 12–16 slightly protruding abaxially. *Stipules* minute, rudimentary, caducous. Catkins coetaneous arising from the terminal bud on leafy shoots. *Male catkins* stout, loosely flowered when fully developed, to 18 cm long on 2–3 cm long flowering branchlets, with 3 to 4 leaflets, and a glabrous rachis. *Floral bracts* broadly obovate or oblong, 1.8–1.95 × 1–1.1 mm, with rounded dentate apex, pale green, glabrous. *Stamens* 2, free or partly connate at the base, glabrous, 3.2–3.5 mm long, anthers 0.65–0.7 × 0.45–0.48 mm, reddish at beginning of flowering, becoming yellowish later. *Nectaries* in male flowers 2, adaxial, two-lobed 0.42–0.48 × 0.3–0.36 mm, abaxial 0.27–0.3 × 0.12–0.15 mm. *Female floriferous branchlets* up to 23 cm long, stout, catkins densely flowered up to 18–22 cm on the 6–7 cm stalk with 4–5 leaves up to 11 cm long and to 8 cm wide, catkin rachis glabrous. *Floral bracts* oblong, 3.0–3.1 × 1.1–1.2 mm with rounded dentate apex, pale green, darker on top, glabrous. *Ovaries* up to 2.7–3 mm long, glabrous, on a stalk 1.3–1.4 mm. *Styles* fused 0.35–0.42 mm, *stigmas* bifid, 0.21–0.25 mm, dark purple. *Mature capsules* up to 3.5–3.7 mm long, green with red styles and stigmas. *Nectary* one, adaxial, 0.8–0.86 × 0.49–0.53 mm wide. *Seeds* 1.84 × 0.61 mm, 14 in each capsule. (Figures 1-3, 7, 9, 10).

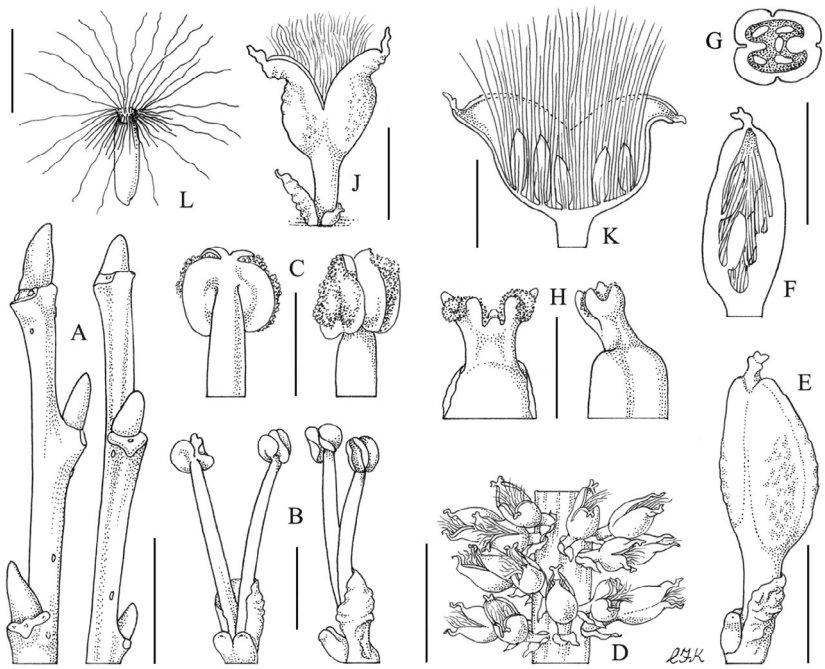


FIGURE 9 *Salix magnifica* Scale bar represents size in mm A, buds on male (left) and female (right) branchlets, 20 mm; B, two views of a staminate flower with open anthers, 2 mm; C, opened anthers, 1 mm; D, fragment of female catkin with open capsules, 10 mm; E, female flower with mature capsule, 3 mm; F, longitudinal section of capsule, 3 mm; G, cross section of capsule, 3 mm; H, style and stigmas of female flower, 1 mm; J, mature capsule with seeds, 3 mm; K, cross section of mature capsule with seeds, 2 mm; L, seed with hair-tuft (coma) on its base, 2 mm. Drawn by Christabel King.



FIGURE 10 *Salix magnifica*. Buds: a) male; b) female. Scale bar = 1 cm. Photographs taken on 18 March 2025 by Irina Belyaeva at Willow Mount, Lydbrook, UK.

PHENOLOGY. Flowering in June–July, fruiting in August.

DISTRIBUTION. China: West Sichuan, where it is endemic.

HABITAT. Mountain thickets.

CONSERVATION. Endemic, vulnerable.

Salix magnifica has been assessed for he IUCN Red List of Threatened Species in 1998. *Salix magnifica* is listed as Vulnerable under criteria A1cd. World Conservation Monitoring Centre. 1998. (*Salix magnifica*. *The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species* 1998: e.T32452A9708079, 2025).

Etymology. Specific epithet derived from Latin *magnificus* meaning great, noble.

Common names. Foot Catkin Willow, Magnificent Willow, Magnolia Leafed Willow.

Salix magnifica f. ***apatela*** (C.K.Schneid.) I.V.Belyaeva, **comb. nov**.

Basionym: *S. apatela* Schneid., Pl. Wilson. (C.S.Sargent) 3: 46 (1916).

≡ *S. magnifica* var. apatela (C.K.Schneid.) K.S.Hao, Repert. Spec. Nov. Regni Veg. Beih. 93: 59 (1936).

Type: China: West Sichuan, Lungan Fu, Tu-ti-liang-shan, 2600–3000 m, August 1910, *E. H. Wilson 4575*, ♀, in fruits (A: A00031147!).

Schneider (1916) noted that *Salix apatela* looks like a "form of *Salix magnifica* with smaller obovate-oblong leaves". Hao (1936) and Fang with colleagues (1999) treated this willow as a variation of *S. magnifica* adding that flower bracts are truncate in *S. apatela* vs. obtuse or rounded in *S. magnifica*.

Phenology. Flowering in July–August.

Distribution. Difference in distribution for varieties was given placing *S. magnifica* var. *magnifica* in West Sichuan and *S. magnifica* var. *apatela* in North Sichuan (Fang et al., 1999) although in Schneider's description location for *S. apatela* was given as West Sichuan.

Habitat. Mountain woodlands.

Etymology: Infraspecific epithet derived from Greek "άπατηλός" meaning "misleading".

Salix magnifica f. ***ulotricha*** (C.K.Schneid.) I.V.Belyaeva, **comb. nov**.

Basionym: *Salix ulotricha* C.K.Schneid., Pl. Wilson. (C.S.Sargent) 3: 44 (1916).

≡ *S. magnifica* var. *ulotricha* (C.K.Schneid.) N.Hao, Fl. Reipubl. Popularis Sin. 1984. 20(2): 157.

Type: China: West Sichuan: Mupin, thickets, 2300–3000 m, June 1908, *E. H. Wilson 1401*, ♀, in fruits (A: A00031216! – lectotype, designated here by I. V. Belyaeva), isolectotypes: K000335165!, NMNH00503648!).

Salix magnifica f. *ulotricha* differs from *S. magnifica* f. *magnifica* in having ovaries and capsules covered with curly hair.

Phenology. Flowering in May–June, fruiting in June–July.

Distribution. Western Sichuan.

HABITAT: Mountain thickets.

ETYMOLOGY: Infraspecific epithet derived from Greek "οὐλότριχος", meaning "with curly hair".

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