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### *Davidia involucrata*

**HANDKERCHIEF TREE** is a deciduous tree. Native to central and western China, it has brush-like heads of tiny flowers {topped with long, red or dark brown stamens} surrounded by long, creamy-white petal-like leaves (bracts).

It is also known as Chinese dove tree, *Davidia listnatá* (Slovak), *Davidie listenová* (Czech), Dove tree, Gentleman's pocket handkerchief tree, Ghost tree, Ladies handkerchief, Lady's pocket handkerchief tree, Pocket handkerchief tree, *Taschentuchbaum* (German), and *Taubenbaum* (German).

In 1998 the World Conservation Monitoring Centre issued the first global list (referred to colloquially as the 'Red List') of threatened plants. The combination of the collection of wild plants for trade and the destruction of its natural habitat in China has led to this tree's inclusion on the List as it is now thought to be rare.

*Involucrata* is derived from Latin *involucrum* (covering) with reference to the petal- or leaf-like bracts normally found at the base of a flower cluster, usually in a ring or rings and only rarely single or paired.

According to records Father David was the first western European to come across the handkerchief tree in the late 1860s-early 1870s. But it was to be another 30-odd years before the tree appeared in Europe.

Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century rumours of this tree fired the imagination of western European plant collectors, gardeners and botanists. Ernest Henry Wilson (1876-1930), the famous English-born American botanist, learnt of the handkerchief tree from an Irish plant collector and dendrologist, Dr. Augustine Henry (1857-1930) who by this time had lived in China for about 20 years. They both appeared to be blissfully unaware that a Father Farges had collected 37 seeds in 1897 and sent them back to France to a tree collector, Maurice de Vilmorin (1849-1918). One of the seeds received by de Vilmorin germinated and bloomed for the first time in 1906. Meanwhile, in happy ignorance and with enthusiasm to be the first to introduce the tree to Europe, Chinese Wilson (as he came to be known) accepted his first commission to find plants in the Far East for the English nursery, Veitch and Sons in 1899. After visiting Henry in Yunnan in south-western China, he followed directions into central China where he eventually found the handkerchief tree and was able to collect seed which he sent back to England. It was only after this that he learnt with considerable disappointment that he had apparently been beaten to the post. But the botanists then realized that the French and English specimens were different species. The former was to be christened *Davidia involucrata* var. *vilmoriniana* and the latter, *Davidia involucrata*.

The handkerchief tree was introduced to North America in 1904.