

Lespedeza – From Asia with a Spanish Twist!

As one of the more severe summers for heat and drought draws to a close, it is interesting to see which plants were least impacted by the weather. From the viewpoint of a gardener, plants with a stout constitution that can endure heat, drought and less than perfect soils should be on everyone's list. Let's face it, although we may toil for hours in our gardens, we cannot pay personal attention to every plant; we need a few plants that can sustain themselves without pampered diets. This is one of the reason why I so appreciate those plants in the Fabaceae or Pea family. These are plants whose roots have developed a symbiotic association with the *Rhizobium* bacterium. These Bacteria have the ability to remove nitrogen from the air and combine it into organic compounds – a process is called Nitrogen Fixation. It is a symbiotic association since the parent plant receives the nitrogen by-product of the bacteria, and the bacteria in return receives sugars from the host plant. Often, plants in this family are also very deep rooted and drought resistant as well. This preamble could lead to a discussion on a number of plants. However, for the autumn garden, one of my favorites is *Lespedeza thunbergii* or Bush Clover.

Lespedeza has a rather interesting history, since the name should be spelled a bit differently. It was named by Andre Michaux (1746-1802) in gratitude of Vicente Manuel De Cespedes the Spanish Governor of Eastern Florida at the time. Cespedes granted Michaux permission to explore the territory for new and unusual plants. Somehow, the beginning letter of Cespedes name was inadvertently changed from a C to an L and the genus was born. It was in the central Piedmont region that Michaux discovered a plant of *Lespedeza*. It was probably an escaped seedling of *Lespedeza striata*, an annual and not very ornamental species that was typically used as a packing material for items shipped from China. The species epithet of *thunbergii* is in respect to Carl Peter Thunberg (1743-1828), who studied the flora of Japan.

As a genus with a rather confused history of how its name is spelled, *L. thunbergii* more than compensates by providing a none-too-confusing performance in the garden! It is best planted in locations which receive full sun and well drained soils. The plants typically are slow to establish, but after 4 years the long wispy stems will arch up to 4'+ in height and reach a 6' spread. I have also found that they look ideal planted above and behind a wall. This is a location that is typically dry and in need of a plant that will soften the harsh lines of the wall. In this location, the plants still grow to 4' tall, but the stems will trail down over the wall, often covering an 8' tall wall. However, it gets better! Starting in late August or September, the tips of the stems elongate to produce flower clusters up to 12" long. Since the stems are variable in length, the entire plant becomes an arching fountain of flowers. The flowers are typically pink or rose in color, although there is a white form called 'Alba'. If planted above a wall, the wall is covered with these flowering stems. Very nice indeed!

Come late October, the small oval leaves that drape the stems turn a clear yellow and are attractive for about a week. Once the leaves fall, the plants are best cut to the ground, since the brown arching stems of winter are not one of its stronger ornamental features. Easily grown throughout NJ, and providing abundant flowers and color come autumn, I am always amazed at why this plant is not featured in more gardens. If you have a wall or garden in full sun with poor soil, become a trend setter by featuring this fun member of the Pea Family!