

The Sweet Smell of Spring

March may not be the warmest month of spring, but by comparison to the previous two months, the days feel absolutely balmy and the sunlight is once again warm upon the skin. In a show of appreciation, garden life in its many forms begins to return to the Garden. Song birds are once again singing at sunrise, buds are beginning to swell and there is that general fragrance of earthiness in the air. However, there are also many sweet fragrances that abound from some of our more precocious, early blooming plants. In the Art Rudolph Sun and Shade Garden at Rutgers Gardens a wonderful fragrance permeates the air, often confusing many of our visitors since they cannot determine its source. Its source is the little known but appropriately named groundcover called Sweetbox.

Sweetbox has the much less appealing botanical name of *Sarcococca hookeriana* var. *humilis*, a true tongue twister if there ever was one! Although the name *Sarcococca* seemingly does not make any sense, it is actually derived from a combination of the Greek words *Sarkus* or Fleshy and *kokkos*, meaning berry. That, taken with the understanding that Sweetbox has a small black fleshy fruit and is a member of the Boxwood family, a family that traditionally has dry fruits, the name becomes more meaningful. Joseph Dalton Hooker (1817-1911), a botanist and a Director of Kew Gardens in England, found the plant growing at over 13,000 feet in the Himalayas and it is in his honor that the species epithet is described. The natural occurrence of Sweetbox actually extends from the Himalayas and Northern India into the rather cold portions of Western China. As a result, it has proven to be hardy into zone 5 portions of NJ!

Given that this plant is perfectly hardy and is evergreen, it has always amazed me that it is not seen more in NJ gardens. The plant slowly spreads by underground suckers and ultimately produces a dense, evergreen groundcover of 15-18" in height. The varietal name of *humilis* means low, aptly describing this form since the straight species reaches 6-8'. Oddly, the straight species is rarely seen in US gardens. The flowers are small, about 1/4" and are rather inconspicuous, since they do not bare any petals. The plants are also monoecious, meaning that the male and female flowers are carried separately but on the same plant. Both flowers are borne or appear in the leaf axils (where the leaf connects to the stem), with the male flower positioned above the female, allowing the pollen to drop onto the stigma. I realize that most people do not find plant reproduction of great interest, but I find the various floral configurations fascinating! Of course, the aspect of the flowers that fascinates everyone is the fragrance. The small flowers produce an intoxicating aroma and with the apetalous flowers buried deeply within the plant, it is now obvious as to why no one can determine the source!

Sweetbox is best grown in shade in NJ, although it will easily tolerate a half day of sun, preferably morning sun. The plant is also drought tolerant and it will grow in slightly alkaline to acidic soils. Over 20 years ago I planted 3 plants adjacent to a parking lot on the Cook campus. The location was shaded by a building, but the soil was – in fact, still is – horrible and the plants never received a lick of care. The plants are thriving! I have also planted Sweetbox beneath high-branched Red Maples with equal success, giving much credit to the toughness of this plant. When you put together its many attributes of being evergreen, site adaptable and spring fragrance, you can understand my amazement at its lack of use. Perhaps this spring, if you have

the good fortune of passing this plant while in bloom, you too will be smitten and add this Himalayan gem to your garden.