

## A Late Flowering Delight adds Late Autumn Fragrance

The garden in late fall is synonymous with the smell of newly fallen leaves, frosted annuals heaped high onto the compost pile, and the sweet fragrance of Osmanthus wafting through the air. Yes, a plant that blooms in November in central New Jersey! Holly Tea Osmanthus, also called False-holly (*Osmanthus heterophyllus*) is an underused plant, that was first introduced into the United States from Japan in 1856. It was described in an article last year by Bob LaHoff, but is deserving of further accolades since it still remains a mystery to many gardeners!

Osmanthus is an evergreen shrub, tolerant of sun or light shade, growing to a height of around 15' in central New Jersey. The species epithet of heterophyllus refers to the two distinct types of foliage that the plant displays during its lifetime. In youth, the juvenile foliage is spiny and resembles that of an American Holly. As the plant matures, the adult foliage becomes predominant, which has a smooth leaf margin and is much more garden friendly. The fragrant flowers are produced from early October into November. The flowers are produced in such great abundance that from a distance the plant appears to be covered by a heavy frost. Better yet, the sweet smell can be detected several hundred feet downwind! Up close, the flowers are small and white, about 1/4" across each. They are borne in clusters of 4 or 5 and appear at the base of the leaf axils.

Osmanthus has one additional claim to fame; it is not on the hors-d'oeuvre list for most of our deer population. During a recent winter, a neighboring Gold Mop False Cypress was totally defoliated, but the Osmanthus remained untouched!

The plant has a number of practical uses in the garden. In the shrub collection at the Rutgers Gardens, there is a plant of Osmanthus that was installed in 1940. Without any recent pruning, it has attained an attractive open and globose habit, approximately 20' tall by 30' across. When left unpruned, the plant can serve as a screen or a backdrop to a mixed border (a mixture of perennials, grasses and woody plants, offering year-round interest). The plant can also be maintained as a hedge. However, the flowers appear on the current season's wood, so by shearing or heavily pruning the plant, you are also going to be removing a large portion of the flowers! Also, by heavily pruning the plant, only the spiny juvenile foliage will be produced.

There are a number of cultivars of *Osmanthus* available. 'Gulftide' is green foliated and a particularly hardy selection for more Northern regions. However, 'Goshiki' is currently one of the most popular cultivars, which is smaller growing than the straight species, only reaching 8-10' tall and wide. Its popularity stems from the yellow splashed foliage, which fades to cream with age. It gives the appearance of having the happy misfortune of being below the ladder of a very sloppy painter! The new growth is an attractive deep pink, shades of which are repeated in the winter foliage. It has proven very cold hardy and resistant to winter burning of the new foliage. I have yet to see it bloom, but would suspect that it has flowers similar to the straight species. This is an excellent plant to intersperse in the mixed border. The plants can easily be maintained at 2 to 3 feet in height, while the foliage combines well with a number of herbaceous perennials and

annuals. 'Goshiki' is also an excellent candidate for a low variegated hedge. Since most Osmanthus produce fruit very sparsely, it is not invasive, and would serve as an excellent substitute for Barberry if you were looking for something on the spiky (painful) side!

With evergreen foliage, fragrant flowers in autumn, and deer resistance, the gardener is once again reminded about a great plant for expanding his or her gardens' plant palette.