

An Herbaceous ‘Maple’ for the Shade Garden

When I first started to study horticulture, I would routinely visit various public gardens to glean whatever knowledge possible about plants. Longwood Gardens was a frequent destination and I became intrigued by a short shrubby Maple growing adjacent to a large clump of Bottlebrush Buckeye (*Aesculus parviflora*). To my surprise, it turned out to not be a Maple at all but an herbaceous plant named Yellow Wax Bells or *Kirengeshoma palmata* (as seen on the right at Frelinghuysen Arboretum).



Kirengeshoma is a member of the Hydrangeaceae or Hydrangea Family and consists of two species. *Kirengeshoma palmata* is native to the large and more southern islands of Shikoku and Kyushu of Japan, where they grow in moist forested valleys at elevations of 2,000-6,000 feet. The genus and species were first penned in 1890 by the Japanese botanist Ryôkichi Yatabe (1851-1899). In 1876 Yatabe was the first citizen of Japan to graduate from Cornell U. and upon returning to Japan he became the first Professor of Botany at the University of Tokyo. The genus name is from the Japanese *Ki* for yellow and *Rengeshôma* or *Renge Shoma* in reference to *Anemonopsis macrophylla*, commonly known as False Anemone and a native of the main Japanese island of Honshu. False Anemone appears much like a fall blooming pink daffodil, but the central trumpet bears a strong resemblance to the overlapping flower petals of Yellow Wax Bells. Hence, the name *Kirengeshoma* describes a plant with a yellow flower similar to the trumpet of the False Anemone. The species epithet of *Palmata* is Latin for ‘hand-shaped’ and describes how a leaf resembles a palm and fingers of a hand (as seen above). Maple trees also share this leaf shape which is why I was initially fooled!



In fact, it is probably this bold Maple-like foliage that gardeners initially find most alluring about this shade loving plant. The oppositely arranged leaves can grow close to 8” in diameter and considering the plant usually reaches 3-4’ tall by an equal or slightly greater width, the plant clearly creates large masses of this wonderfully bold texture. In fact, some plants at Frelinghuysen Arboretum annually stretch to nearly 5’ tall and wide! Despite its size, the stems of the plant are solid and resist bending or breaking, eliminating any need for staking. Adding to the bold leaf texture is the attractive dark purple petioles of the uppermost leaves as well as the purple color of the upper 1/3 of the stem (as seen on the left). The flower buds begin to appear in early June at both the apical tips and from the leaf axils of the upper two or three tiers of foliage. For those flower buds



growing from the leaf axils, they appear in clusters of 3 while those appearing at the tip of the stem often have two additional buds, appearing in clusters of 5. The flower buds are initially round and covered with small silvery hairs (as seen at left) for those preferring a close examination! As the buds start to open the yellow floral petals elongate and form a bell-shaped bloom (as seen in the closing image), inspiring the common name of Yellow Wax Bells.

The globe shaped flower buds may appear in early June, but they certainly serve to keep the gardener in a state of great abeyance, considering the flowers do not begin to emerge until early August. When the buds are studied closely (again as seen above), the swirling and overlapping nature of the flower buds is already evident! Fortunately, the gardener's patience is rewarded with a long bloom season lasting through mid-September. The flowers are rather curious since they never fully open. Rather, they dangle downward, hiding the inner floral parts and appearing to me like small golden lanterns. On close inspection, the five flower petals overlap their neighboring petal by roughly $\frac{1}{2}$, tightly encircling the 15 stamens and the 3 central styles (as can be seen on the right). Following pollination and shedding of the petals, the green cup-shaped calyx and the 3 lightly curved yet very prominent styles remain. The ovary and 3-chambered seed capsule are initially rather small following petal drop, but enlarge throughout October and by November have grown into a



brownish-green sphere around $\frac{1}{2}$ " in diameter (pictured at left). The three now wavy and dark purple styles remain attached and give the seed capsule an appearance similar to a spider or some alien creature with a triad of legs or antennas. By late December the seed capsule splits open to reveal the three chambers and release the small yet tan seeds. The seeds have small winged appendages, allowing the wind to help move them to new sites. Despite the

assistance of the wind and the numerous seeds produced, I have only seen a few seedlings near the mother plant and would never consider this plant as invasive!

As mention, *Kirengeshoma* consists of two species with the second species found in Korea. It was originally considered to be a variety of its Japanese cousin, but in 1935 the Japanese botanist Takenoshin Nakai (1882-1952) thought the plant to be sufficiently unique and named it *Kirengeshoma koreana*! At a casual glance, the two species do appear virtually identical, yet with a bit of study there are unique differences. Probably the most obvious are the flowers! Instead of appearing like a dangling bell, the flowers are more outwardly oriented than dangling with the tips of the petals recurved or flared outwards, providing a more dramatic appearance (as seen at right).



The flowers also appear a week or so earlier than its cousin. In addition, the plants lack the showy purple stems and petioles of its cousin and are inclined to grow slightly taller and wider with somewhat smaller foliage. The differences are certainly nominal, yet the somewhat greater internode length of the stems between the leaves gives the plant a more layered appearance. Also, for those that prefer a slightly more dramatic flower, the Korean form might be more appealing.

Both species prefer acidic soils that are rich in humus and remain moist, yet not boggy throughout the growing season. In fact, *Kirengeshoma* is actually intolerant of neutral or alkaline soils and requires a pH below 6.5 to prosper. Typically, the plants prefer shade, although in locations where there is a consistent supply of moisture, the plants are certainly tolerant of more sun. The plants do well on the north side of a home or under the canopy of tall trees such as Tulip (*Liriodendron tulipifera*) or Oak (*Quercus spp.*). In those locations where plants receive a ½ day of sun combined with moist soils, the gardener is most likely to be rewarded with the 5' tall specimens mentioned earlier. The golden yellow flowers provide a wonderful air of beauty and elegance if the plants are featured in a quiet part of the shade garden where they mix well



with Maiden Hair Ferns (*Adiantum pedatum*), the Smooth Hydrangea (*Hydrangea arborescens*) and Solomon Seal (*Polygonatum spp.*). Where plants receive morning sun, consider underplanting Yellow Wax Bells with the relatively evergreen Black Mondo Grass (*Ophiopogon planiscapus* 'Nigrescens') as seen at left in March. The dark purple foliage highlights the yellow flowers and repeats the purple petioles! Both species

of Wax Bell are hardy in zones 5-8, although *K. koreana* is reputed to be slightly hardier. In the southern reaches of its growing zone, a shaded site is certainly preferred.

For a novice gardener studying plants at Longwood Gardens, the tidy appearance of *Kirengeshoma palmata* and bold Maple-like foliage provided all the qualities necessary to make me a fan. I never understood why they featured merely one plant with the Bottlebrush Buckeye, but I am very grateful to Longwood for providing me with the introduction!



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