

## Getting Jazzed on Jasmine

Plants with winter blooms are certainly a ‘must’ for every garden, but they are not without their share of interesting challenges as well. While we embrace our winter bloomers who brave the cold and provide the first peaks of color, they often become overlooked once winter passes. Perhaps due to an unattractive form, an inability to add garden interest following bloom or simply because they are ‘just’ another green shrub, they are often overlooked at garden centers come May. Fortunately, some of these plants fulfil creative and beneficial rolls for the garden beyond just their blooms. I have found Winter Jasmine, botanically known as *Jasminum nudiflorum* to be just such a plant (as seen at right in late December). It provides great color throughout winter while resolving some challenging design problems throughout the balance of the year!



*Jasminum* is a member of the Oleaceae or Olive family and has over 200 species. The genus was first penned in 1753 by Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778) when he was naming and describing the highly fragrant *Jasminum officinalis*, which is the type species for the genus. A type species is the plant by which the description of a genus is based. The genus name is derived from the Persian *Yasameen*, which means ‘gift from god’, which certainly describes the heavenly floral fragrance of this species! *Jasminum officinalis* has been cultivated for several thousand years, which has proven problematic since it has been cultivated for so long that the exact location of its native provenance is uncertain! It appears to be native from the Caucasus east to Western China and has proven hardy in zones 7-10. It is a twinning and vigorously growing vine, with compound leaves that consist of 5-9 sharply pointed, lanceolate leaflets. The funnelform or trumpet shaped flowers have 5 petals that provide a wonderfully heady fragrance from May through September. The species epithet of *officinalis* was a term Linnaeus coined in 1735 and used repeatedly. It stems from the Latin *officina*, which originally meant workshop or place of work. Later, it became the name of the storage room in monasteries where medicines and medicinal plants were stored. *Officinalis* means ‘belonging to an Officina’ and Linnaeus affixed this epithet to plants or animals that were known to have medicinal benefits. The essential oils extracted from the roots and the flowers of *Jasminum officinalis* were used for a multitude of medicinal uses, including an aphrodisiac, a sedative, antiseptic, antidepressant and analgesic.

Although Fragrant Jasmine is only marginally hardy for New Jersey, Winter Jasmine has proven to be very hardy, readily surviving zone 6 winters where temperatures can dip to 10 degrees



below zero Fahrenheit. It is native to Northern China, growing in thickets on slopes and in ravines. It is tolerant of varying soils conditions, thriving in sandy or silty loams as well as in either lightly acidic or alkaline conditions (pH of 6-7.5). The species was initially ‘discovered’ in 1844 at a Nursery in Shanghai by the Scottish botanist and plant collector Robert Fortune (1812-1880). He proceeded to send a plant(s) back to the Royal

Horticulture Society in England whereupon it was authored by the English botanist, gardener and orchid aficionado John Lindley (1799-1865) in 1846. The species epithet of *nudiflorum* means ‘naked flower’ and describes how the plants bloom on naked or leafless branches (as seen above) before the leaves appear in April. The flower buds are initially blushed in red and open to 1” golden yellow flowers with red markings on the undersides of the 5-6, radially arranged petals. Protruding slightly from the corolla tube is a globe shaped stigma (as seen above and in the closing image below) with two anthers located within the corolla tube and hidden from sight. The flowers appear sporadically along the deep green and photosynthetic stems as temperatures



permit from late December through February, with the main show often delayed until March. The one amenity the flowers lack is the sweet fragrance of its cousin. At best the fragrance can be considered as musty moss! In China, the flowers are pollinated by small bees, flies or moths, which result in small black fruits. It appears the plants are not self-fertile and those grown in cultivation lack the genetic diversity necessary to produce the fruits. In fact, it is

speculated that all the plants in cultivation in the US originate from one plant introduced into North America!

Even when not in flower, the leaf bare stems of winter provide a rich, deep green accent for the Garden. The stems arch upwards to 3-4’ tall, although they are recorded to grow taller. Square in cross section, when they come in contact with the soil they root and the new growth repeats the arching habit, ultimately creating a dense thicket. For those that do







not mind a somewhat untidy plant, it makes a great groundcover (as seen in the first image). The compound leaves appear alternately along the stems in April, with each leaf consisting of 3-5,  $\frac{3}{4}$ -1" long, lance-shaped leaflets. The leaves remain a deep green throughout the summer, fading to yellow or bronze come fall before dropping (as seen above left).

As mentioned, the plant lends itself to making a dense and weed suppressing ground cover. However, it can also be trained up on a wall or a fence to become an interesting espalier or vine-like architectural compliment, ultimately reaching 6-10' tall. In the image above right at Frelinghuysen Arboretum following a March snow, the plant is worked up on a lattice fence. When treated in this manner, it will need to be thinned and pruned back so it does not grow out into the path or touch the ground, resulting in new and unwanted plants taking root! Also, any dead wood is best removed to keep it looking its best. The plants also look spectacular when located above a wall, as the stems will dangle over the edge and cascade down 10-12' (as seen above left at Longwood Gardens). Not only does this help to soften and hide an unattractive wall, but it is also a very effective technique for presenting the floral display! Many years back I wished to soften and screen an 8' tall wall made of large boulders at Crystal Springs Resort. The wall was not unattractive from afar but, when



viewed at close range it needed some help. A silty subsoil had been packed in-between the boulders. Not only was this soil lacking in organic matter, it was highly compacted (pictured above left several years after planting). Winter Jasmine plugs were planted in between the boulders and without any irrigation, not only did the plants survive but they thrived, providing total concealment of the wall (as seen above right, 18 years after planting) and a winter flower display!

With an ironclad constitution and wintertime floral interest that is only enhanced by an inability to self-sow and a resistance to deer browse, one would think this would be a far more commonly

used plant among gardeners. Unfortunately, when most people are shopping for plants, Winter Jasmine is merely one of those green ‘things’ in a container and is passed over without a second glance. *Jasminum nudiflorum* is an incredibly useful plant for training on walls and providing color when few plants dare to bloom. Without question, word of its garden worthiness needs to be spread and hopefully, it will become known by far more gardeners who need to get Jazzed on Jasmine!



Bruce Crawford

Manager of Horticulture, Morris County Parks Commission