

Illicium – Southern Charm for NJ Gardens

As a gardener, I am generally more enamored with plants that display a subtle attractiveness rather than those that scream for attention. Of course, spring is typically all about attention! Birds flicker their colorful plumage and sing elaborate songs in the quest for a mate, while plants provide a colorful show of flowers, courting any potential pollinator. Trust me, I love color, but subtle is often more alluring! Fortunately, within this ruckus of garden color there are a number of really good garden plants carrying a more subtle and alluring flower. Of these, one plant actually means alluring - the Florida Anise or *Illicium floridanum*.

With a name like Florida Anise, it certainly implies that it is not native to NJ, which is in fact true. Florida Anise is native to the Southern Piedmont and was initially discovered by William Bartram on January 24, 1766 near Silver Glenn Springs, Florida. The species was described by John Ellis (1710-1776), a naturalist and zoologist who studied within the territory called Western Florida, which now consists of Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi and parts of Florida. *Illicium* comes from the Latin *Illici*, meaning allure or entice, while *floridanum* is from the Latin *florid* or flowering. With such an alluring flower that actually led to the name of the plant, what is so alluring about this flower for it to warrant such a name?

The flower is typically maroon-purple in color, although there are off-white selections. They range in size from 1-2" in diameter and are composed of 20-30 strap-shaped, slightly reflexed petals. In NJ, they appear in late April into May and, although the flowers never consume the plant with color, the myriad petals are fascinating to study. Some people find the flower fragrance malodorous since they are pollinated by flies – as much as I have tried, I have yet to detect any fragrance at all! The flowers of this genus are also self-incompatible, whereby a single plant or a mass planting of one cultivar will not yield any seed. This prevents the plant from becoming weedy or potentially invasive. There are several cultivars on the market for improved flower color. 'Woodland Ruby' has deep purple-red flowers while 'Semmes' has brilliant, pure white flowers.

The foliage too is alluring! It is evergreen, 2-4" in length and lustrous dark green; a perfect addition for the winter garden. The leaves are pleasantly aromatic when crushed, emitting a fragrance similar to Anise and they contain neurotoxins. These toxins render the plant resistant to deer browse, another benefit for the garden. In their native habitats, the plants typically grow in flood plains or in moist areas, but are very adaptable to dry shade. In fact, the plants growing at Rutgers Gardens are planted in the dense shade of a large *Taxus*, where its roots compete with those of the Yew for water and nutrients. Even during prolonged droughts it shows no hint of stress! *Illicium floridanum* is typically single stemmed and non-suckering, ultimately growing to 8' tall and about 6' wide, although it can be kept smaller through judicious pruning. A related species, *Illicium parviflorum* is also native to the SE region. It has much smaller flowers and is a larger, often more suckering a shrub, growing to 15' tall and well over 10' wide. Interestingly, a selection of this species, named 'Florida Sunshine' has bright chartreuse foliage and really brightens up a shady location.

Florida Anise is best grown in the shade and can be used for screening purposes, as a hedge, or in a mixed shrub planting. With the growing number of gardens that are filled with dense and

dry shade, while simultaneously endure the pressures of deer predation, this regional native certainly has great promise. After all my accolades about the wondrous subtleties of the 'alluring' *Illicium* flower, I certainly hope that it garners much greater attention and use from gardeners in the years to come!