

Hardy Orange – a Friend for the Winter Garden

February is a distinctly different month for the gardener than January. Granted, winter is still upon us and the Garden has changed little since the start of December. However, there is that faint hint that spring will once again return as the days slowly become longer and there are renewed signs of life within the Garden. As gardeners, whether it is because we instinctually sense this change or simply because we grow restless of the indoors, we once again venture into the Garden and beg reacquaintance with those plants that we have not truly seen since November. Many of our garden plants have great winter interest. As is often the case, you may never even have considered giving some of these plants a more prominent position in the winter garden if not for these February strolls. One such discovery that I made over 30 years ago was the wonderful winter structure of the Hardy Orange, *Poncirus trifoliata*.

For those yet acquainted with this plant, *Poncirus* has superb sculptural lines for the winter garden! *Poncirus* is native to China and Korea and is a member of the Rutaceae or Citrus Family. *Poncirus* is a mixture of the Latin *pomum* for fruit and *cirus* for wax. Its association with fruit is obvious, since it produces abundant 2" fruits that ripen to an attractive orange color come October. The fruits are mostly seeds with little pulp, rendering them inedible – although they are used to make marmalade. The reference to wax comes from the waxy bloom on the younger branches. The species epithet of *trifoliata* refers to the arrangement of the leaves in clusters of three. The straight species grows to 30 feet tall and is hardy to at least minus 5 degrees Fahrenheit. Years back, I planted this species in a 5'x8'x2' deep planter on a deck in Union County, NJ. It lived for nearly 10 years before dying during an extremely cold winter, validating its tolerance to the cold.

Although the fruit is an obvious ornamental attraction for autumn, during winter it is the stem color and form that takes precedence. The aged bark is gray and deeply furrowed, while the juvenile bark is bright green and attractive. However, it is the very pronounced 2-3" long thorns, located below the leaf buds on the younger stems that take center stage in winter. They are actually modified branches, but are very impressive, even to a gardening neophyte. For the smaller garden, the contorted form called 'Flying Dragon' is more appropriate. Not only is the branching habit curved, contorted and very architectural, but the draconic thorns are curved backwards. Not only does this provide an additional detail, but it makes the plant more user friendly! At Rutgers Gardens, this plant always piques the interest of our visitors.

In May, both the straight species and 'Flying Dragon' are covered with 1" fragrant white flowers. Come autumn, the leaves typically turn a very attractive yellow or orange-yellow, complimenting the fruit display. It is best to clean up the fallen fruit in late winter, since the plants will typically self-seed after a warmer winter. For best flowering and development, locate the plants in full sun and in well-drained soils. I have witnessed the plants at Longwood Gardens mixed with succulents, sedums and other plants requiring a dry, relatively infertile site. The effect was very pleasing. They are also well adapted for hedging, since I have seen both the straight species and 'Flying Dragon' clipped into a hedge. I, for one, would not take much pleasure in conducting the pruning, but it does make for a very dramatic and impenetrable hedge!

Thus, as you venture forth on your February garden strolls, take note of the winter architecture of your many plant friends. You too may discover a hidden friend that should be brought into the wintertime spotlight – much as I did 30 years past!