

Choisya – A Southwestern Native for NJ Gardens

It is safe to say that most people dislike January! The days are short and the sun sits low in the cold skies, defying many to journey out into the Garden. Yet, for all of these negative virtues, I quite like this month. There is the peace in knowing that what you saw two weeks past will appear exactly the same today! Traditionally, it is the season for evergreens. I must admit, evergreens are an important backbone to any garden, but as a whole, they are not one of my favorite groups of plants. Perhaps it is that quality of never changing that makes this group somewhat boring to me. However, there are always exceptions to every rule and one such exception is *Choisya ternata*, the Mexican-orange.

Mexican-orange is a relatively newcomer for me. It was given to Rutgers Gardens 4 years ago and after hearing that the genus heralds from Arizona south into Mexico, I really doubted its ability to survive in NJ. Once again I was proven wrong and I felt that this truly underused plant is in need of promotion for NJ Gardens! *Choisya* (pronounced choiz'ē-à) is named after the Swiss Professor of Philosophy and Botanist, Monsieur Jacques Denis Choisy, who had an affinity for Mexican plants. The species epithet of *ternata* refers to the 3 deeply cut lobes of the leaf, giving it the appearance of three leaflets. The leaves are a lustrous, rich green in color and remain attractive all winter in Middlesex County, NJ. When crushed, they emit a pungent spicy odor found undesirable by deer. Translation, they are resistant to deer predation! *Choisya* is in the Rutaceae or citrus family, so it is easy to see how it acquired its common name. *C. ternata* typically grows to 6-8' high and wide, although other forms remain lower. The plant that was given to Rutgers Gardens is *Choisya* x 'Aztec Pearl', is a cross between *C. arizonica* and *C. ternata*. It remains more compact in habit, supposedly only reaching 4-6' in all directions. Although the books state that Aztec Pearl is only winter hardy to zone 7 (0-5 degree F.), students have twice tried to dig this plant up in late October, believing it to be a non-hardy plant. Typically, cutting away parts of the root mass is the death knell for marginally hardy plants. However, in both instances, the plant came through without even a whimper of a brown leaf. Truly a tough plant indeed!

Choisya prefers conditions that one would expect in the Southwest: full sun to lightly filtered shade and soils that are acidic and well drained. Protection, especially during the initial establishment period from strong winter winds will also prove beneficial. Warm humid evenings appear to be more problematic than cold temperatures, typically not a problem for NJ gardeners. Otherwise, the plants need little care. *Choisya* 'Aztec Pearl' has grown into a relatively tight and attractive plant with absolutely no pruning or supplemental care during its four years in the Gardens. In addition to its modest needs, in late April through May, the plants are laden with fragrant white flowers up to 1" wide and in clusters of 3-6 at the end of the shoots. *Choisya ternata* has clean white flowers and buds, while Aztec Pearl has buds that exhibit a pink blush as they expand, eventually opening into white flowers. The selection 'Sundance' has golden yellow foliage, providing a dash of color even when not in bloom.

Since Mexican-orange does not even remotely resemble cacti or succulents typical of the southwest, it appears at home in NJ gardens. *Choisya* is very tolerant of pruning and can make a great hedge for a dry, sunny slope or serve as an attractive winter feature in the mixed border. Its

fresh green foliage of winter and attractive habit will always brighten a person's day – even during these cold days of January!