

A Plant that Relieves Strife

I am always amazed at how innocent some plants look in a container, but how challenging they become once planted into the Garden. Even more amazing is how the ill reputation of a few species in a genus can damage the garden worthiness of all the species. A classic example is the genus *Lysimachia*, whose species are collectively known as Loosestrife.

Lysimachia is in the Primulaceae or Primrose Family and consists of approximately 190 species that are found in every major continent with temperate or subtropical climate. The center of diversity for the genus is Eastern India and Southern China. The genus name was initially proposed by Joseph Pitton de Tournefort (1656-1708), a French Botanist who was also responsible for more clearly defining the difference between genus and species, and penning the name 'herbarium'. There are two different thoughts on what influenced Tournefort to conjure up this name. It has long been thought that when Loosestrife is placed upon the yokes of enraged oxen, it will calm the beast. Based on this lore, it may honor King Lysimachus (361-281 BC) of Thrace, who supposedly calmed a raging bull by presenting a plant of this genus before him. Thrace occupied the geographic area that is now southern Bulgaria, western Greece and northern Turkey. The name may also come from the Greek *Lysis*, meaning release and *Mache* for strife, which would certainly explain the common name!

Loosestrife in gardens is probably best represented by *Lysimachia nummularia* 'Aurea', commonly called Golden Moneywort. First described by Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778) in 1753, the species epithet is from the Latin *nummus*, which means coin and refers to the resemblance of the round leaves to that of a coin (pictured on right).

Moneywort is a procumbent or creeping plant, with nearly evergreen or in the case of this selection 'everyyellow' leaves on red tinted stems that can stretch to 18-24" in a season. When in contact with soil, roots will develop at each leaf node, making it a good groundcover, although plants tend to die-put in the center. Hardy to zone 3, the species is native to Europe,



the Caucasus and Turkey. Although the yellow flowers that adorn the stems in June are typically sterile, the plant has escaped cultivation in the United States and is often considered invasive.

However, when used to soften and spill over the edge of a container or in a contained part of the garden with light shade, the golden foliage is very ornamental.

Another commonly grown species is the Gooseneck Loosestrife, *Lysimachia clethroides*, which is native to damp woodland margins, wet ravines and sunny grassy hills and mountains of Japan and China. From June into

July, the 24" tall stems are topped by 4-5" long flower racemes that are densely packed with ½" wide white flowers.

Although the racemes are upright, they are characterized by an S-shaped crook in the stem (as pictured on the right), giving them the resemblance of a Gooses neck! The species was named in 1844 by Jean Étienne Duby (1798-1885), a French botanist and clergyman who, among other plants, studied Primulaceae. The



species epithet refers to the similarity of the flower to that of *Clethra*. In moist soils, it will rapidly spread by rhizomes to form a thick carpet, which if sited properly, can be suitable for soil erosion control or as a tall groundcover. In sunny areas, a light orange fall color often develops.

Relatively unknown and well worth wider use is Lance Leaf Loosestrife, *Lysimachia lanceolata*. Named by botanist Thomas Walter (1740-1789) in 1788, the species name refers to the 2" long, slender red leaves that adorn the stems. Native to eastern North America, plants produce pendant, ½" diameter yellow flowers between June and August (as seen on the right) that are beloved by short-tongued bees. In lieu of nectar, the flowers produce a floral oil to entice visitation. Plants thrive in full sun to light shade in well-drained to moist soils. This species has proven to be far less imposing in the landscape and grows in a billowy, cloud-like fashion. It looks great growing in-between grasses or other clump forming perennials and the red foliage adds a pop of color that glows when surrounded with green foliated companions.



The various *Lysimachia* species have great garden attributes, especially when consideration is given to the

appropriate siting so that the plant does not become problematic. One important attribute I have yet to mention is the resistance of Loosestrife to deer browse – an increasingly important garden attribute for gardeners. I am also hopeful that gardeners will consider growing *Lysimachia lanceolata*. It is a phenomenal filler and foliage plant, as seen below when planted amongst



Prairie Dropseed (*Sporobolus heterolopsis*) that would greatly benefit many a sunny garden – if only gardeners could avoid letting the more aggressive tendencies of other members of this genus impact their judgement!!