

## A Plant of Lusty Appeal

March certainly presents its share of plant related challenges for the gardener. We truly look forward to those initial peaks of color from the early blooming plants. The challenge comes with their diminished appeal once bloom is complete; they are either overlooked at local garden centers or simply not available due to a lack of consumer interest. Fortunately, some plants can provide alternative rolls in the garden once flowering has passed. I have found Winter Jasmine or *Jasminum nudiflorum* to be just such a utilitarian plant, providing great color in late winter while resolving some challenging design problems throughout the balance of the year!

Jasmine is a member of the Oleaceae or Olive family and has over 200 species located within the genus. The genus was first penned by Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778) in May of 1753 when he was naming and describing *Jasminum officinalis*, which is the type species for the genus. The type species is the plant by which all the remaining 200 or so species of *Jasminum* are compared and assigned as members of this genus. The name is derived from the Persian *Yasameen*, which means ‘gift from god’, which adequately 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 Caucus region east to Western China and has proven hardy in North America to zone 7 (0-10° F). This species is a twinning and vigorously growing vine, with compound leaves that consist of 5-9 sharply pointed, lanceolate leaflets. The funnellform 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 that 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 were used for a multitude of medicinal uses, including an aphrodisiac, a sedative, antiseptic, antidepressant and analgesic.

Although Fragrant Jasmine is only marginally hardy at best, Winter Jasmine has proven to be very hardy, readily surviving zone 6 winters when the temperatures dip to 10 degrees below zero Fahrenheit (pictured at right in Rutgers Gardens). It is native to Northern China, growing in thickets on slopes and in ravines. It is also very tolerant of varying soils conditions, thriving



in sandy or silty loams as well as in either alkaline or acidic conditions. The species 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 stems from the plants habit of blooming on naked branches before the leaves appear in April. The red-tipped yellow flower buds open to  $\frac{3}{4}$ ” golden yellow flowers with red markings on the undersides of the 5-6, radially arranged petals (pictured at right). The flowers appear sporadically along the deep green stems during warm spells in January and February, but the main show appears from March into early April. The one amenity that the flowers are wanting is the strong 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 originate from one plant introduced to 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 of 3-4’ in height, although they are recorded to grow taller. When they come in contact with the soil, they root and repeat the arching habit, ultimately creating a dense thicket that makes the plant an excellent candidate as a groundcover. The compound leaves appear alternately along the stems in April, with each leaf consisting of 3-5,  $\frac{3}{4}$ -1” lance-shaped leaflets. The leaves remain a deep green throughout the summer, fading to an unspectacular yellow fall color before dropping.

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 over a fence to become an interesting espalier or vine-like architectural compliment, ultimately reaching 8-12’ tall (as seen on the right). When treated in this manner, it will need to be thinned and any dead wood 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





below). Not only does this help to soften the architecture of the wall, but it is also a very



effective technique for presenting the floral display! This type of treatment can also be used to hide less than attractive walls. Many years back I wished to soften and screen an 8' tall wall made of large boulders. The wall was not unattractive from afar, but when view as close range, it needed some help. The soil that was in between the boulders was a very poor silty subsoil, which lacked any

organic matter and was highly compacted (pictured below right). Without any irrigation, Winter Jasmine plugs were planted in between the boulders and not only did the plants survive, they thrived, providing both concealment of the wall and late winter color!

With an ironclad constitution and wintertime floral interest that is only enhanced by an inability to self-sow and – much like its cousin Forsythia – is resistant 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, it is but merely one of those green ‘things’ in a container and it is passed by without a second glance. *Jasminum nudiflorum* is an incredibly useful plant for brightening and enhancing the garden throughout the year. Justifiably, its lusty appeal and garden worthiness needs to be known by far more individuals in the gardening world!



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