

## A Barking Beauty

As if it was only yesterday, I remember my landscape plants instructor telling the class about the difficulty in finding woody plants that have more than one season of interest. Most plants are either known for flowers, fall color, bark interest or an interesting shape or habit. He would frequently describe plants that had two seasons of interest, but it was rare for him to mention a plant that had all four. Fortunately, for us plant lovers, there are several plants that do provide year-round interest. One such small tree is *Stewartia pseudocamellia*, the Japanese Stewartia.

Although *Stewartia pseudocamellia* is native to Japan, there are species of *Stewartia* native to Korea, China and South Eastern US. *Stewartia* honors John Stuart (1713-1792), the Prime Minister during the reign of King George III who was also an enthusiastic naturalist and botanist. The species epithet of *pseudocamellia* means false camellia, referring to the similarity of its flowers to those of a Camellia. As mentioned, Japanese Stewartia is a small tree, slowly growing to 25 feet tall and wide. Initially, the habit is upright, but it becomes broad spreading with age. The Camellia-like flowers appear during July and August. They are cup-shaped and white, measuring 2-2 ½" in diameter with a prominent tuft of orange anthers in the center. Each flower lasts about one day, but they are produced in sufficient quantity to provide interest for 3-4 weeks. During autumn, the leaf color turns to an orgy of orange, reds, yellows or purples; the more sun the plant receives, the more prominently the red tones are featured. During winter and early spring, the bark and branch structure take precedence. Once the tree is taller than 8-10 feet, the bark begins to exfoliate, revealing tan, gray, pink and orange underbark – very cool! When mature, the bark assumes a more muscle-like or sinuous characteristic, further enhancing its interest.

Similar to the above is *Stewartia koreana*, the Korean Stewartia. Although most books mention that this tree matures to the same size as its Japanese kin, I have seen specimens that easily approached 50' in height! The flowers are slightly larger, to 3" in diameter. They still have the prominent center of orange anthers, but they are much flatter in appearance and usually bloom a week or so longer. The fall color and bark is similar to that of *S. pseudocamellia*. The major difference is the bark has more shades of gray and orange and less tones of pink.

I should also make mention of *Stewartia monadelphica*, the Tall Stewartia. Although the flowers are much smaller (1-1 ½" in diameter) and the fall color mostly yellow, older specimens have gorgeous orange-red bark. Planted in front of an evergreen, the winter effect is truly spectacular! Also native to Japan, it reaches 70' tall in the wild, but usually half that in cultivation.

All 3 species are very cold tolerant and can be easily grown throughout NJ. Apparently, *Stewartia koreana* is more heat tolerant, which is important if you are considering a location that has a lot of reflective heat from buildings or pavement. In their native environments, these trees are understory plants. As such, they will grow happily in light shade, although the best fall colors generally result in full sun. Soils should be moisture

retentive and rich in organic matter. Drier soils and full sun often result in leaf scorch during August. Due to their adaptation to moister locations, they are generally shallow rooted. This is an important detail to consider if it is to be planted adjacent to walks or patios since the roots may lift the pavement over time.

In the garden, trees with year-round interest should be planted where they can obviously be appreciated every day. Near an entryway, a prominent walk or outside of a well-used window is ideal. Thus, the next time you are at a lecture or a garden party and someone asks about plants with four seasons of interest, you can now provide at least three additional answers to this great gardening dilemma!