

Seven Times the Fun

If you follow this column on a regular basis, you have certainly come to understand my love for plants and my enjoyment of sharing what little I know with all that will listen!! Given that fact, tours of Rutgers Gardens are often laced with plant tales and much waxing eloquent of plants that we chance upon during our walk. During my tenure as a tour guide, one plant that has frequently elicited an exclamation of “what is that?” falls claim to *Heptacodium miconioides*, commonly called the Seven Son Flower.

From the common name, one might suspect that this plant is a perennial or annual; a plant which is aglow with flowers all summer! Quite the contrary, it possesses the stature of a large shrub or small tree – depending upon how it is pruned – and offers far more than one season of interest. The genus name of *hepta* is from the Latin, meaning seven and *codium* refers to head, which aptly describes the cluster of flowers. Each group or head of flowers consists of a circle of 6 flowers, with the seventh protruding proudly from the center of the whorl. The genus epithet refers to its physical similarity to a genus *Miconia*, a group of tropical trees and shrubs named after the Spanish physician and botanist, Francisco Mico. *Heptacodium* was first discovered in China by E.H. Wilson in 1907 and described (documented) by Alfred Rehder at the Arnold Arboretum in 1916. The plant appears to have vanished from the U.S. until 1980, when seed collected from the Hangzhou Botanical Garden finally journeyed to the United States via the Sino-American Botanical Expedition, and the plant was once again reintroduced to the garden.

Although the botanical name is not very flowing, the plant has many great attributes that benefit even the smallest of gardens. Growing to 20’ tall and 15’ wide, the shape of the plant is truly determined by the gardener as to whether it becomes a small tree or a large shrub. Rather awkward in youth, plants that are 2-3’ tall should be pruned to one or, at most, 3 dominant stems. As it grows, it also tends to produce numerous water sprouts on the major branches. Although these sprouts often provide the plant with a very full and lush appearance, they typically grow adjacent to large existing branches which inevitably results in branch rubbing. The key is to prune the watersprouts as they appear throughout the early summer. During July, the flower buds appear, but they merely serve to tantalize the gardener since they do not finally open until August! The flowers are individually small ($\frac{1}{2}$ ”) but they are amply produced and are very effective in the landscape. In addition, the fragrance is sweet and easily detected in the warm and humid days of August. Following the flower, the calyx or the outer set of protective ‘leaves’ that are typically found at the base of the flower, enlarge and turn bright red. They are highly ornamental in late September into October, giving the appearance of clusters of bright red fruit from a distance. The seed clusters are hidden within the center of the calyx, and although they are distributed by the wind, the plant is not invasive.

The bark of the plant also has a magnetic appeal for gardeners. It is light brown and exfoliates or peels in long thin papery strips, revealing a rich and darker red inner bark. Thus, if it is grown as a small tree, plant it outside a room with a major winter view from within the house, allowing the bark to be appreciated year round!

Regardless of whether pruned as a tree or a shrub, *Heptacodium* is plant that can enhance gardens of all sizes throughout NJ. As seen at the entrance to the Otkens Memorial Garden at Rutgers Gardens, tours will certainly be rich with much more tales of this plant for many years to come!