

COLLECTOR'S NOTEBOOK

The Sweetleaf

Richard E. Weaver, Jr.

Many of our fine native shrubs are seldom seen in American gardens, either because they are unfamiliar to the gardening public or because they are difficult to propagate or transplant.

Symplocos tinctoria is one of these plants. This interesting southeastern native is known by several common names: sweetleaf or horse sugar, because the sweet-tasting leaves are attractive to browsing mammals, and dye-bush, because the bark and leaves yield a yellow dye.

The sweetleaf is a shrub or small tree, occasionally to 9 m tall; it usually forms loose colonies from root sprouts, much in the manner of *Sassafras albidum*. The handsome leaves, 13–15 cm long and 3–5 cm wide, are thick and lustrous. They are clustered at the ends of the twigs and resemble those of *Rhododendron carolinianum* or the mountain laurel (*Kalmia latifolia*) except for the few, inconspicuous teeth along their margins. They often persist until November or December in the south. The delightfully fragrant, creamy white flowers are crowded into nearly stemless, very dense clusters, and they appear in April or May, before the leaves. A plant in flower somewhat resembles the various

wild plums. The berries are yellowish and unspectacular.

Several varieties have been recognized by botanists. *Symplocos tinctoria* var. *tinctoria* occurs in hummocks and at the edges of swamps on the coastal plain from Delaware to Texas. *Symplocos tinctoria* var. *ashei* is a plant of the Southern Appalachians from North Carolina to Georgia. It is most common on dry ridges, but it also occurs in moist lowland forests. *Ashei* can be distinguished from *tinctoria* by its hairy twigs and earlier deciduous leaves. It certainly should prove to be the most cold-hardy of the varieties. A third variety, *S. tinctoria* var. *pygmaea*, a dwarf plant with small leaves and few flowers, occurs in sandy soil in a restricted area of southeastern Virginia.

Symplocos is a rather large genus of trees and shrubs widely distributed in the warmer areas of Australia, Asia, and the Americas. The sweetleaf is the only species native to the United States and is therefore the northernmost representative of the group in the New World. Several of the species are used on a small scale as dye plants, but few are cultivated for ornament. Only the sapphire-berry (*Symplocos*

paniculata), a wide-ranging Asiatic species, is used for such purposes in the United States, and then only rarely. The sapphire-berry is a fine ornamental. With its open clusters of white flowers appearing after the leaves have partially expanded, and its beautiful blue berries, it is very different in appearance from the sweetleaf.

Very little information is available concerning methods of propagation of *Symplocos* species. Jack Alexander, propagator at the Arnold Arboretum, uses an alternative warm/cold stratification for the seeds of *S. paniculata*, but germination is poor. He said that softwood cuttings of the sapphire berry, taken in early July, had rooted well by September, when they were transferred to pots. Surprisingly though, not a single plant grew out the following spring. Alexander had no data on the propagation of *S. tinctoria*.

Several years ago I tried to collect plants of the sweetleaf in Burke County, North Carolina, for the Arnold Arboretum. I found that the plants in the colonies I sampled were mostly suckers from very thick, sparsely branching roots, with very few fibrous roots attached. Plants that reproduce in this manner are



Flowers of *Symplocos tinctoria* var. *tinctoria*.
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usually very difficult to transplant, and none of the ones I collected survived. Such plants usually can be propagated from pieces of their roots, however, and *Symplocos tinctoria* is no exception.

One- to two-inch pieces of root taken in December and January produced shoots within one month and roots within two months. Root growth has been slow, and the cuttings probably should not be disturbed until their second spring. I have not tried to germinate the seeds, as I have not been able to acquire any. They are seldom produced in the foothills of North Carolina.

Since the sweetleaf can now be propagated and transplanted easily, container plants should become available, and this interesting shrub will make its debut in American gardens.

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