

Japanese Clethra: A Hidden Gem

Richard Schulhof

At the edge of the Arnold Arboretum's Central Woods, far from most visitors, grows an exceptional specimen of Japanese clethra (*Clethra barbinervis*, accession 13087). I first became enamored with this species as a student at Longwood Gardens, where I admired its elegant form as part of the backdrop to the famed Flower Garden Walk. While I later saw several very fine examples of Japanese clethra in the great gardens of the Delaware Valley, none approached the singular beauty and character of the Arnold Arboretum's specimen.

Like many plants in the Arboretum's collections, this accession comes with an impressive pedigree, tracing back to Japan in 1886. In that year, William Penn Brooks, a Massachusetts native and valedictorian of the state agricultural college class of 1875, sent seeds of several species to the Arnold Arboretum. Brooks, then a teacher and administrator at Sapporo Agricultural School, found time to survey the surrounding countryside of Hokkaido for interesting plants, several of which came to enrich the Arboretum, including katsura tree (*Cercidiphyllum japonicum*) and hardy kiwi (*Actinidia arguta*).

Of these plants, the Japanese clethra accession is Brooks's greatest Arboretum legacy. At 122 years of age, the specimen is over 20 feet (6 meters) tall and nearly 15 feet (4.5 meters) wide. In the forests of Japan and Korea, Japanese clethra is said to attain heights of over 30 feet (9 meters), but in North America I have seen few specimens larger than the Arboretum's accession.

Although its American cousin, summersweet (*Clethra alnifolia*), is better known to gardeners, the Arboretum's E. H. Wilson considered *C. barbinervis* to be the finest ornamental in the genus. Unlike summersweet, Japanese clethra is more a small tree than a shrub. Judicious pruning can emphasize the small-tree form; when trained as such, it displays sinuous single or multiple trunks broken by floating tiers of foliage. This treatment also shows the tree's exquisitely mottled cinnamon, salmon buff, and slate grey bark to full advantage.



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Japanese clethra's leaves are deep green through summer. Autumn color tends to be unreliable. I have seen outstanding tints of red and burgundy on specimens in both southeastern Pennsylvania and here at the Arnold Arboretum, but in other years have noted little color change before the leaves fall away inconspicuously. Japanese clethra's white flowers are similar to those of summersweet, but they are borne in 4 to 6 inch long paniced racemes that nod forward and gently twist. Japanese clethra blooms around mid July at the Arboretum, about two weeks before our native, and though some consider the fragrance inferior to summersweet, my nose finds it ample in portion and delicious in scent; if anything, too much of a good thing.

Clethra barbinervis is listed as hardy to USDA Zone 5 (average annual minimum temperature -10 to -20°F [14 to -4°C]). Our venerable specimen has survived the coldest of Boston winters, but has proven vulnerable to drought. During a very dry summer in the early 1990s, the death of this specimen seemed certain, with each leaf appearing as if torched to a crisp. Phoenix-like, it recovered, living on as one of the Arboretum's most distinguished, and best-hidden, centenarian plants.

Richard Schulhof is Deputy Director of the Arnold Arboretum.