The Worthy Kerrias

by JEANNE S. WADLEIGH

An old fashioned shrub, *Kerria japonica*, infrequently grown these days, has been accorded a position of prominence in the renovated Bussey Hill planting at the Arnold Arboretum.

William Kerr, a plant hunter from Kew who discovered *Kerria japonica* and sent it back from China in 1805 would be pleased: his acquisition, originally known as *Corchorus japonicus*, has more than justified his notice of it and has been widely cultivated both here and in England where it was a popular cottage shrub in years past. Perhaps its recent recognition in Jamaica Plain will cause gardeners in this area to consider it and its four varieties when an easy, durable accent plant is wanted for informal landscapes.

*Kerria* has other attributes: it bears sunny yellow flowers beginning in May and intermittently throughout most of the summer, it prospers in shady spots (which also help to preserve the brilliant color of its blossoms), it increases freely, and its slender bright green branches are attractive during the winter months.

A member of the Rosaceae and actually native to Japan, *Kerria* was renamed in 1818 by Prof. A. P. De Candolle in tribute to Kerr's memory. The original plant sent back from China was the double *K. japonica* 'Pleniflora,' which at first was cultivated as a warm greenhouse plant because of uncertainty about its hardiness. It subsequently was discovered to be frost-hardy and by 1810 had made its appearance in most of the principal plant collections about London.

The species itself bears 1- to 2-inch single flowers not unlike buttercups in appearance; *K. Pleniflora* is more vigorous and its ball-shaped blossoms remain in good condition on the arching branches for a longer period of time. Popularly known as Globeflower (not to be confused with *Trollius*), it is the variety most commonly grown, although *K. Aureo-variegata* with yellow-edged leaves appeals to people favoring variegated foliage. A dwarf form, *K. Aureo-vittata* bears branches conspicuously striped with green and yellow. *Kerria* 'Picta' has leaves bordered
with white (specimens in the Arnold Arboretum shrub collection have tended to revert, however.)

Generally growing from 4 to 8 feet in height, Kerrias benefit from pruning after the flowering period to promote new growth to bear next year's blooms, and also to remove tips that have winter-killed. Although hardy to Zone 4, they are susceptible to this injury if not provided with a well-drained, partly sheltered location.

The plants increase very rapidly by suckers which the roots produce in ample numbers, but the preferred way to obtain new stock is by softwood cuttings taken in June or July.