

The Magnificent Ginger

Gary L. Koller

Introduced into North America only ten years ago, *Asarum magnificum* has already attracted attention.

Horticultural and botanical aficionados who travel abroad often discover unfamiliar plants that look as though they might have garden application in their home countries. During May and June of 1978, Dr. Richard Howard, then Director of the Arnold Arboretum, visited the People's Republic of China on a tour sponsored by the Botanical Society of America and hosted by the Chinese Academy of Sciences. The delegates' travels were extensive and included a visit to the Wuhan Institute of Botany. It was here that Dr. Howard noticed an unusual *Asarum* (commonly called wild ginger) under cultivation. He immediately recognized it as "very handsome and very different" from anything he had seen before. He was given a small division only after promising not to write a description of the plant in the botanical literature, since the Chinese scientists who had discovered it in Hunan Province had not yet done so. Indeed, a full description of *Asarum magnificum* was not published until five years later, in 1983, by C.-Y. Cheng and C.-S. Yang in, fittingly, *The Journal of the Arnold Arboretum*. According to the authors, the plant grows over a wide geographical range, having been found in Jiangxi, Zhejiang, Hubei, and Guangdong provinces as well as Hunan. We believe that Dr. Howard's delivery of this plant to the Arnold Arboretum in 1978 was its original introduction into North America.

Stunning Foliage

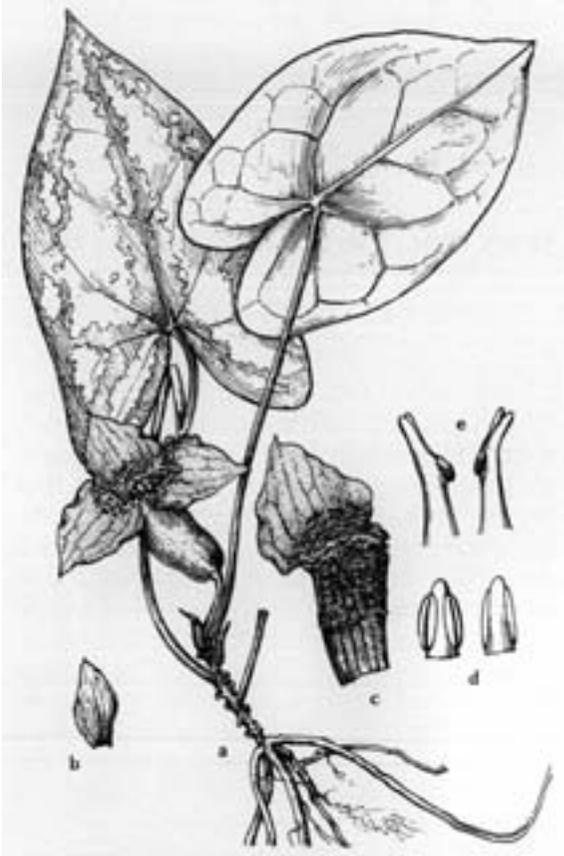
The largest plant of *Asarum magnificum* known to this author forms a clump approximately thirty to forty centimeters (twelve to

fifteen inches) tall. This large stature is one of the features that makes the plant handsome and different. Another is the large, heart-shaped leaves, with two prominent lobes, that project back from the point where the petiole is attached. The upper leaf surface is a rich dark-green color with silvery markings. These silver patches form a continuous, but irregular, band aligned parallel to the leaf lobes. Between this band and the edges of the leaf there are numerous small flecks of silver. In fanciful terms, the magnificent ginger seems to combine the elegant foliage of some of the more familiar *Asarums* with the image and presence of a variegated *Hosta*.

The flowers of the magnificent ginger are relatively large in comparison to the other species in the genus. They are about five centimeters across (two inches) and purple-brown in color. Unfortunately, they hug the surface of the ground and are often obscured from view by the foliage.

Cultivation

What have we learned about this plant during its first ten years in North America? For one thing it has the potential to become extremely popular in light of the fact that the original plant at the Arnold Arboretum greenhouses was stolen after a single division was put up for sale at the Arboretum's annual rare plant auction in 1985. Fortunately, the division had been purchased by Allen Haskell of New Bedford, Massachusetts, who generously donated a piece back to the Arboretum after the theft of our plant. Subsequently his plants and those growing in another nursery were



Asarum magnificum. Illustration from the Journal of the Arnold Arboretum, 1985, volume 64, page 594. One half natural size.

stolen. At this point, a decision was made to divide and distribute the remaining stock to various locations. This experience provides a clear example of the merit of sharing rare plants so that losses can be recouped by the exchange of surviving materials.

We have determined that *Asarum magnificum* is hardy out-of-doors in Massachusetts. This is somewhat surprising since the large leaves are fully evergreen. Allen Haskell reports that one year he set out five plants in his garden in New Bedford in November, a time which is less than ideal, and that all five survived. This success may have been because they were growing in a location that was partially shaded. Because the rhizomes and roots are shallow, Haskell recommends that the

plant be grown in a moist, organic soil and that it be well watered prior to the freezing of the soil. In addition, plants should be sheltered from both the summer and winter sun and strong winds, which might desiccate the foliage. One plant, growing at the Garden in the Woods in Framingham, Massachusetts, which is a good five to ten degrees colder than New Bedford, failed to survive the winter. At the edges of its northern border of hardiness, it might be wise to protect the plant with an antidessicant.

Richard Weaver, former staff member of the Arnold Arboretum and now co-owner of We-Du Nursery in Marion, North Carolina, also sent us a report based on his six years' experience growing the magnificent ginger. He states that the plant sends out rhizomes up to a foot in length, which, instead of forming a clump, will produce a leaf here and there, forming a diffuse and open plant. This open character makes the plant somewhat less beautiful in the ground than it is in a pot, and suggests that perhaps the plant needs to be confined in order to look its best. The plant is fully evergreen at his location in North Carolina where temperatures have fallen as low as minus six degrees Fahrenheit.

Weaver also reports that late spring frosts have sometimes damaged the new growth on his plants and reduced their overall vigor. Last summer he moved one plant to a relatively wet site, which turned out to be a mistake. He has since moved it back to a location with better drainage. Experience has taught him that the magnificent ginger is easy to transplant at almost any time during the growing season.

Propagation

Propagation of *Asarum magnificum* is relatively easy, a feature that, along with its ornamental foliage, should help the plant to catch on quickly. Haskell has discovered that when he lifts and divides a plant, all of the remaining root pieces will produce new plants. When he divides a plant, he lays every root scrap horizontally in a mixture of leaf mold and sand, and covers them to a depth of

about one centimeter (one-half inch). Once the small plantlets emerge, he transplants them into peat pots. These he places in a flat that contains a shallow layer of compost. As the plants root through the peat pots into this underlayer of compost, he can harvest these roots to propagate the next generation. According to Haskell, an individual root piece can produce plantlets for up to two years.

In the garden the magnificent ginger looks good either as a specimen or in a mass planting, similar to a large grouping of hostas. As a garden combination, the bold cordate leaves of the magnificent ginger contrast beautifully with the delicate foliage of the Japanese painted fern (*Athyrium goeringianum* 'Pic-tum'). It is also attractive when planted in islands carved within a bed of *Vinca minor*. The green of both foliages is the same shade, and visually the contrast in form and texture is elegant and appealing.

As gardeners, we owe a debt of gratitude both to Dr. Howard for recognizing a plant of distinction and bringing it home so that we could discover its beauty and its uses in the garden and to the staff of the Wuhan Institute of Botany for generously sharing this plant with us.

References

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Howard, R. A. 1978. Botanical impressions of the People's Republic of China. *Arnoldia* 38: 218-237.

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