The Ghost Bramble—*Rubus lasiostylus hubeiensis*

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The 1980 Sino-American Botanical Expedition has produced yet another horticultural gem.

To the chagrin of most of its inhabitants, winter renders the landscape of New England a quiet composition of browns and grays, speckled with evergreens and snow. Despite the somberness and length of our winter, the design of most cultivated landscapes does little to brighten the winter season, deferring always, it seems, to the more obvious bounties of spring. Yet there are plants that instill drama and beauty in the winter landscape, and make enjoyment of the garden more than a short, seasonal affair. The silver-stemmed brambles, appearing in the landscape as bold, arching stripes of white, are a notable example.

While species of the genus *Rubus* are most commonly known as providers of delicious fruit, or as flowering ornamentals, at least three species—*R. cockburnianus*, *R. biflorus*, and *R. lasiostylus*—are grown for the winter ornament of their silver-white canes. Although rarely found in American gardens and difficult to locate in the nursery trade, the silver-stemmed brambles are further recommended for their undemanding cultural requirements, their resistance to pests and diseases, and their adaptability to the stresses of urban environments.

**Introduction in 1980**

*Rubus lasiostylus* var. *hubeiensis*, or the "ghost bramble," is a relatively recent addition to this ornamental group and perhaps the best among them for winter stem color and overall habit. Indigenous to the Shennongjia Forest District of Western Hubei Province in central China, the plant was found growing amidst *Sinarundinaria* thickets on steep slopes and in disturbed meadow areas. Seeds of this species were brought to the United States through the 1980 Sino-American Botanical Expedition, and seedlings raised in the Dana Greenhouses were planted out in the Arboretum's Bradley Rosaceous Plant Collection in 1985. It has since become one of our most talked-about plants during the winter months.

Appearing as if whitewashed or made of chalk, the whiteness of the canes derives from a thick, waxy bloom coating the stem. The arching six- to eight-foot plant develops a dramatic, fountain-like form, and is most remarkable for its ability to reflect light. On cloudless winter days at the Arnold Arboretum, the plant shines like a beacon, serving as a focal point for a broad expanse of landscape.

In summer, *R. lasiostylus hubeiensis* partly recedes from view, cloaked in foliage that is generally free of both insects and diseases. Of medium texture, the four- to six-inch-long leaves consist of three to five ovate leaflets that can be either lobed or unlobed. A cool lime-green color, they provide a pleasing contrast to the rust-red prickles and white stems. Notably, the prickles, though bristle-like, are vicious enough to make this plant an effective barrier shrub.

Attractive but unspectacular, the pinkish-white, dime-sized flowers appear twice a sea-
The general habit of the ghost bramble, Rubus lasiostylus hubeiensis, growing at the Arnold Arboretum. Photo by Rácz and Debreczy.

son. The first-year canes produce a terminal inflorescence at the end of the summer. The following spring, the canes branch profusely, with each branch producing an abundance of flowers. The orange-red fruits that follow are described by some as more showy than the flowers, and though they are edible, they seem to lack the rich flavor of commercial raspberries.

Maintaining the older canes for flower and fruit production does, unfortunately, mean sacrificing winter effect. In their second year, the canes tend to lose their glaucous bloom over the course of the winter, never regaining the striking whiteness of their youth. At the Arboretum, the unexceptional flowers and fruit are seldom seen as the plant is coppiced annually to produce a fresh crop of first-year canes.

Aside from several minute botanical distinctions, the variety hubeiensis differs from variety lasiostylus in having fruits that are orange-red instead of whitish. Also, in the two specimens available for comparison, hubeiensis appears to have a whiter and fuller waxy bloom on the stems.

Evidence that Rubus lasiostylus hubeiensis is the best of the silver-stemmed brambles comes from side-by-side comparison with R. cockburnianus, the most commonly cultivated member of the group. Not only does hubeiensis have a whiter and longer-lasting
The foliage of the ghost bramble. Photo by Rácz and Debreczy.

stem color—the true test for any “ghost bramble”—but also it possesses a more graceful and upright habit. Though debate persists in some quarters, performance comparisons at the Arnold Arboretum suggest the superior ornamental qualities of *R. lasiostylus hubeiensis* will, in time, make it the silver-stemmed bramble of choice in winter gardens across the country.

**Propagation**

Experiments with the propagation of this variety are ongoing at the Arboretum. Thus far, unlike most members of the bramble clan, *R. lasiostylus hubeiensis* has proven surprisingly difficult to propagate. Hardwood cuttings taken in August rooted with only a 10 percent success rate, while root cuttings removed in April did even worse, producing shoots at only a 9 percent rate. Fortunately softwood cuttings taken in mid-June produce more favorable results. Among a variety of hormone treatments, “Hormone Root B” (IBA 4,000 parts per million plus 15 percent Thyram) was the most
successful, with 87 percent of 24 cuttings producing roots.

Though more trials are needed, the performance of *R. lasiostylus hubeiensis* in gardens on both the East and West coasts suggests that it is highly adaptable, tolerant of heat and drought, pest free, and amenable to either full sun or light shade. It has also proven to be a vigorous grower, spreading both by suckering shoots and by rooting cane tips that come in contact with the ground. At the Arnold Arboretum, the ghost bramble appears to be less invasive than many other *Rubus* species and can be effectively restrained by annual coppicing or by removing the suckers.

Attractive as a specimen or in a small mass planting, the ghost bramble would contrast beautifully against a carpet of *Vinca minor* or *Ajuga repens*, or against a dark evergreen backdrop. Hardy to at least USDA Zone 5, it should be tried as a barrier shrub, as a bank planting, or in a winter garden where its architectural form and striking color may be most effectively applied.

For information on obtaining cuttings of this plant, please write to:

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