

The *Forsythia* Story

Donald Wyman

During his years at the Arboretum, Donald Wyman was not only the horticulturist but also the first editor of *Arnoldia*, a post he held for twenty-nine years. Wyman did more to define and communicate the purpose of the Arboretum to the general public than any other staff member since the days of Sargent and Wilson. In this article one gets a taste both of his distinctive style and of the breadth of his knowledge.

Forsythia suspensa sieboldii was the first forsythia introduced into Europe from the Orient, going to Holland in 1833. Unquestionably, it was popular. Here was a new plant with brilliant yellow blossoms each spring, always dependable. It was soon learned that in good soil it would have more blossoms than in poor soil, but even when the growing conditions were difficult, it would grow into an interesting, green-leaved bush which was not susceptible to serious inroads from insect or disease pests.

As time went on, and more horticulturally-minded individuals visited the Orient, other species were introduced. *Forsythia viridissima* was brought from the Orient by Robert Fortune in 1844.

It is of interest to note that other species have not contributed much to the beautiful cultivars we grow today. The European *Forsythia* of Albania is not outstanding and was not even "discovered" until 1897. Two years later it was introduced into England. China is the habitat of both *Forsythia suspensa* and *F. viridissima*, as well as *F. giraldiana*, which was not introduced until 1914.

Korea is the homeland of *Forsythia ovata* (introduced to America by E. H. Wilson of the Arnold Arboretum in 1918), as well as *Forsythia viridissima koreana* (introduced in 1917), and *F. japonica saxatilis* (introduced in 1924). Although most of these have probably been grown in Japan for centuries, *F. japonica* is the only species native to that country. None is native to North America. So the two introduced species growing in Europe by 1850 (*suspensa* and *viridissima*) can be considered to be the "ancestors" of the many cultivars we are growing today. Undoubtedly these two species were grown side by side in several places and, of course, eventually had the opportunity to hybridize.

Then the great Späth Nurseries in Berlin, Germany, became interested in growing seedlings. The seeds were collected from plants which obviously had an opportunity to hybridize, and in 1885 the hybrid species *Forsythia intermedia* was described. Seedling selections were made by Späth in this group and several were introduced. These were more upright and vigorous in growth than the arching *F. suspensa*, and several of the new hybrids produced larger and more profuse flowers. Also, some clones were selected because they

had lighter (or darker) yellow flowers than had been noted before.

Because these plants grew rapidly and were easily propagated by cuttings, they were widely distributed, and some have been popular ever since.

The parade of "new" varieties started in 1899 with the introduction of 'Vitellina' by the Späth Nurseries. It will be noted that this is not one of the best for ornamental purposes in modern gardens (*Arnoldia* 19: 11-14, 1959). This was quickly followed by the introduction of 'Densiflora' by Späth in 1899, long a popular plant. Now it is superseded by others. Two years later 'Decipiens', a poor-flowered clone of *Forsythia suspensa*, originated at Späth's, but it never proved popular.

However, in 1906 this same nursery introduced *Forsythia intermedia* 'Spectabilis' which was extremely popular right from the start, and has been so to the present time. For a profuse display of deep golden yellow flowers, this is the one that any new cultivar has to beat when it comes to critical comparisons. Never before had any forsythia produced as many flowers or such deep-colored flowers as did this new hybrid selection. Another selection of *F. suspensa* named 'Pallida' appeared in Germany in 1906 and merited some attention at the time because the flowers were a much lighter color than those of the more popular 'Spectabilis'.

During the ensuing years, these forsythia were, of course, being grown in the United States, and in the Arnold Arboretum an attempt was made to grow them all. There, about 1912, a new seedling was found and later named 'Primulina'. This was another cross between *Forsythia suspensa* and *F. viridissima* and was appropriately named because of its pale yellow flowers. Many liked it, especially those who did not prefer the strikingly brazen yellow of 'Spectabilis'.

In Mentor, Ohio, a suburb of Cleveland, a gardener of some note by the name of M. H. Horvath had been experimenting with plants for several years, growing new seedlings, selecting some and discarding others. In his

garden there was a plant of 'Primulina' which he watched carefully from year to year. In 1930 he noted that one branch consistently produced larger flowers than those on the rest of the bush, and they were certainly more densely arranged. Cuttings of this were taken, producing plants that were superior to 'Primulina' and about 1942 this was introduced to the trade by Wayside Gardens of Mentor, Ohio, as 'Spring Glory', a plant that has been one of the most popular of all forsythias ever since.

The forsythia story continued on the other side of the Atlantic, in a beautiful garden called Lynwood in northern Ireland, where the owner, Miss Adair, was growing, among other things, a plant of *Forsythia* 'Spectabilis'.

Miss Adair noted that a branch of this plant had flowers that were more open and better distributed along the stem than were those of the rest of the plant. Cuttings were taken and grown by the Slieve Donard Nursery of Newcastle, Ireland, and named 'Lynwood' about 1935 in honor of the estate where it originated. Unfortunately, in the early years it was not properly described, and somehow or other, by 1949 when it had reached America, where supersalesmen are sometimes overly anxious to coin new plant names, the name was changed to 'Lynwood Gold'. The plants are the same. This cultivar is known all over England as 'Lynwood', and in America as 'Lynwood Gold'. It, too, is one of the most popular forsythias at the present time.

Back in America, the New York Botanical Garden enters the story, for slightly before 1939 an extremely dwarf forsythia was found there. This was named *Forsythia viridissima* 'Bronxensis' by T. H. Everett in 1947. It was early to bloom, but difficult to propagate and grow properly, an unfortunate characteristic, since all forsythias are commonly considered easy to grow.

At the same time, Dr. Karl Sax of the Arnold Arboretum became interested in the *Forsythia* clan and started treating some plants with colchicine and hybridizing others. Many seedlings were grown; a few have been named.



Forsythia suspensa f. pallida. Photo by Rącz and Debreczy.

'Arnold Giant' was produced by treating a seedling of *Forsythia intermedia* with colchicine. The resulting plant was a tetraploid, but it was unfortunate that it was ever named and released. Although vigorous, it proved too rigidly upright and was hard to propagate by cuttings. Two years later, in 1941, a very dwarf forsythia was produced as a cross between *F. intermedia* and *F. japonica*. This roots extremely easily, makes an excellent plant for banks, and is now widely available. It was named 'Arnold Dwarf'.

More crossing and experimenting on the part of Dr. Sax and his students and careful examination of earlier seedlings brought to light another seedling, a cross between 'Arnold Giant' and *Forsythia ovata*. This was a triploid, first called 'Farrand' by Dr. Sax and later changed to 'Beatrix Farrand' at the request of Mrs. Beatrix Farrand, for whom it

was named. This produces dense clusters of flowers, is upright and dense in habit, slightly darker in flower than 'Spectabilis' under some conditions, and now widely popular. During these years, several seedlings were sent out for trial by the Arboretum and one, which was a cross between 'Arnold Giant' and an unknown forsythia, proved to be a tetraploid and was noted as being hardier in the Midwest. This was named 'Karl Sax' by Dr. J. L. Thomas of the Arnold Arboretum for Dr. Sax, who originated it.

The Swiss nursery firm of Mertens and Nussbaumer named 'Mertensiana' in 1949, but it has not proved a very desirable ornamental. A variegated form of *Forsythia viridissima* originated in England some time before 1951, and a more ornamental cultivar of *F. suspensa atrocaulis* was selected and named 'Nyman's Variety' in 1954, in honor of the beautiful estate in the south of England where it originated.

Undoubtedly yellow-leaved plants have appeared in the past, most of them suffering severely when exposed to full sunlight, but the one which has been named *F. intermedia* 'Aurea' (1958) was found in a garden near the Beardslee Nurseries of Perry, Ohio.

And so it is seen how two species introduced into Europe from the Orient before 1850 started a colorful procession of cultivars. Many individuals, in widely separated places, have been responsible for the selections. Others yet unknown may have tried crosses without striking results. Certain it is, however, that although several species have been introduced from the Orient since 1900, it is chiefly *Forsythia suspensa* and *F. viridissima* from China which have been largely responsible for the best of the forsythias grown today.