

A Habit to Cultivate

Gary Koller

***Securinega suffruticosa*, a plant that's both tough and graceful, deserves some recognition.**

Visually and spatially unsatisfactory landscapes often result from the need to keep the size and scale of plants within bounds. To control them people tend to get out their shears and execute a crewcut no matter what the plant or the time of year or how the pruning will affect growth or flowering next year. The only thought is to keep the plant at bay with as little time, effort, and expense as possible. The shears appear and the disfigurement of the plant begins.

Plants that were meant to grow together as a mass or thicket end up as tight little gumdrops. Whatever the plant's innate grace and beauty, it is lost, maybe forever, and as added injury its maintenance needs have just escalated. Keeping the plant frozen as an awkward caricature raises the chore level considerably.

As often as not, the fault lies in the initial selection. The plant may simply be too big for its location, and this is where the workings of the market come in. The nursery industry seeks plants that propagate easily, in cost-effective percentages. They must grow rapidly, ideally reaching a marketable size in eighteen to thirty-six months. But plants that grow that fast in the nursery almost always continue at the same rate once they're established in the home garden. They quickly outgrow the space allotted them.

Enter the buying habits of the too-typical gardener. At one time or another we've all succumbed to the attractions of a plant in full, glo-

rious flower and thrown to the winds any consideration of how much and how quickly that plant will grow. (As a general rule of thumb most shrubs grow as wide as they are tall—a six-foot tall shrub will be six-foot wide.) Just as in the long run the overall composition of plants is more important than the effect of any one individual, so a cohesive, billowy, free-flowing effect is more important than an ephemeral floral or seasonal effect. This is where the plant's habit, or form, comes into play. In plant selection habit often takes precedence over any other characteristic, such as flower color or size. Plants that play their part without constant restraint become very valuable, and some of those plants may well lack major ornamental qualities as we generally think of them. Such a plant is *Securinega suffruticosa*, the fountain hardhack, which does not merit its almost total anonymity. It deserves to be known and used, especially for its graceful form and size.

A Cascade of Foliage

Securinega suffruticosa matures from upright branching into a gradual outward arch that in summer is a bright yellowish green. In autumn the cascading effect is enhanced when the foliage turns a clear, bright, buttery yellow. Its saturated color and delicate, airy texture combine to form a golden waterfall.

In winter the plant presents another pleasing effect when its colony of twiggy stems mimic a



A group of four sixteen-year-old *Securinega suffruticosa* plants grow on a dry bank near the top of Bussey Hill at the Arnold Arboretum. They were propagated from seeds collected in South Korea on the Arnold Arboretum expedition of 1977. Photo by Margot Balboni.

miniature woodland. Whereas in summer the new stems are a bright green, in fall they turn a light tan that contrasts with the darker browns and blacks of most shrubs and trees.

The foliage is alternate with a simple, ovate shape. In late summer the plant bears a multitude of small greenish yellow flowers in the leaf axils, but the blossoms will be missed by all but the most observant. The fruit, the size of a small peppercorn, is divided into three sections with three to six seeds and adds an interesting beading effect to the branches. It ripens from pale green to brown at maturity. At some point in the ripening process the capsules burst open and fling out their contents, reaching distances of three to five feet or more. Germination trials indicate that optimum

results occur after three months of cold stratification.

A member of the spurge family (Euphorbiaceae) that is native to northeast Asia, *Securinega suffruticosa* was introduced to cultivation in North America by the Arnold Arboretum in 1881. In *The Flora of Japan* Jisaburo Ohwi reports that it is a common native that grows in thickets and on grassy slopes in the lowlands of Honshu, Shikoku, and Kyushu. Cultivations of *Securinega* in the Arboretum landscape represent several wild populations. In the autumn of 1977 Stephen Spongberg and Richard Weaver brought back wild-collected seeds from South Korea. In 1984 botanists from the Research Institute of Ecology and Botany, Vacratot,

Hungary, collected seeds from a mixed, rocky, broad-leaved forest and pinewood on granite hills at three hundred meters altitude in North Korea, and shared these seeds with us, helping to further expand the genetic diversity of our living collections.

A Variable Habit

The plant's habit varies with age and vigor. At the Arnold Arboretum a planting approximately five years old grows in full sun at the top of a dry bank. Here the plants range in height from five to eight feet tall, and they remain upright overall. Elsewhere on the grounds a ten-year-old planting that stands in dappled shade has grown three to four feet tall and has acquired a strongly arching habit. Much older plantings also share this size and shape.

At the Arnold Arboretum these plants thrive in full sun to light shade, and they seem exceptionally tolerant of dry conditions. To my knowledge there is no history of dieback from either winter damage or summer heat and drought. Indications are that the plants will not tolerate heavy or poorly drained soils nor an exposure of more than moderate shade. The plants are hardy to at least USDA Zone 4. The occasional occurrence of spontaneous seedlings suggest that the plant may prove invasive, a potential that should be guarded against.

The bright yellowish green of the summer foliage mixes well with other plants to create compositions of shape, texture, and form. For autumn and winter viewing *Securinega* makes an excellent thicket for border plants, useful

in parks and smaller-scale residential landscapes. Its drought and cold tolerance as well as its graceful habit make it an excellent candidate for difficult conditions such as rooftops and other situations requiring large containers. It might even serve as a delicate barrier in highway median strips.

In 1992 I featured this plant in *American Nurseryman*, a publication of the nursery trade, but response was limited to one or two requests for seed. This reflects the trade's need to stay with proven winners, which in turn contributes to landscape plantings that are tried, true, and boring. Nurseries will not produce this plant—and we will not discover the full potential of this quiet but beautiful Asian shrub of tough character and graceful habit—until innovative gardeners and landscape designers are willing to experiment with it.

The Andersen Horticultural Library's *Source List of Plants and Seeds*, which lists commercial sources for over 47,000 plants, includes one for *Securinega suffruticosa*: Sheffield's Tree and Shrub Seed, 273 Auburn Road, Route 34, Locke, New York 13092. We have collected seeds from established plantings at the Arnold Arboretum and will be happy to supply a packet to anyone who asks. You need only send to my attention a self-addressed, stamped envelope and a donation of \$5 to help defray our expense in supplying the seeds.

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