A Late Summer Ornamental: Poliothyrsis sinensis

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A handsome shrub with many desirable traits seeks a common name.

Relatively few shrubs or small trees are notable for their characteristic of flowering late in the summer season and into the fall, when the ornamental attributes of most woody plants consist of their fruits and fall foliage color. Within the past fifteen years, however, the Arnold Arboretum has received two shrubs as new introductions from China, both previously lost to cultivation, that have proved to be noteworthy, late summer-flowering ornamentals. The so-called seven-son flower (Heptacodium miconioides) has received some attention in the horticultural press (Koller, 1986). Introduced by the 1980 Sino-American Botanical Expedition, Heptacodium has become established in the nursery trade and is now available both locally in New England from Haskell's nursery in New Bedford, Massachusetts, as well as by mail order from Wayside Gardens, Hodges, South Carolina. The second plant, Poliothyrsis sinensis, however, has not to my knowledge been heralded in the American horticultural press although English botanists and plantmen have chronicled its history in cultivation in the British Isles. It is so little known, moreover, that no common name has been coined for this interesting plant.

This species, the sole member of the genus Poliothyrsis, belongs to the otherwise largely tropical plant family Flacourtiaceae, and the only other genus in the family grown in the Arnold Arboretum is Idesia, also represented by a solitary species, I. polycarpa. First discovered by Augustine Henry at the end of the last century in central China, P. sinensis was not introduced into western gardens until the legendary plant collector E. H. Wilson supplied the Arnold Arboretum with seeds in 1908. Interestingly enough, these seeds were shared with botanical and horticultural institutions in Europe, where the plant has survived in cultivation to this day. At the Arnold Arboretum, however, established plants grown from Wilson's seed introduction were inexplicably removed from the collections in 1933. The reintroduction of the species to our collections in 1981, when seeds were received from the Shanghai Botanical Garden, has provided us with another opportunity to evaluate this plant under Massachusetts growing conditions.

Two plants resulting from the seedlot from Shanghai were planted in a sunny location near the site of the old Bussey mansion. They are now multiple-stemmed shrubs approaching twelve feet in height, although in nature the plants apparently develop into moderately sized trees to fifty feet in height. In habit our shrubs are rather upright, although their ultimate shape and height, as well as the bark of the stems, will undoubtedly change should the plants persist in our collections. Both, however, have been flowering annually—commencing in 1990—during late August and September. Numerous small, yellowish-white flowers are produced in moderately large inflorescences on the current year's growth and contrast nicely with the dark, emerald-green leaves, which are borne on reddish stalks. Indeed, it was the attractive, lustrous green
leaves that first drew my attention to these shrubs. And while the reddish or almost magenta-colored petiole suggested that the fall color of the leaf blades might be of a similar hue, those of our plants assume a warm yellow in late October and November.

The flowers are either staminate or carpellate (the plants are monecious) and include four to six sepals, the whorl of petals being absent. The carpellate ones develop into interesting capsules reminiscent in size and shape of those of the lilac. These ripen to a greenish-gray color, when the outer covering falls away to reveal the tan inner walls of the capsules. Once the outer walls have been sloughed off, the inner walls dehisce by three valves from the apex, and likewise, by three from the base. While the capsules are dissimilar in shape and substance from those of *Franklinia alatamaha*, the dehiscence pattern—from both the apex and base of the capsule—is shared by these otherwise unrelated genera.
Two Poliothyrsis sinensis grown from seeds received in 1981 are now approaching a height of twelve feet (Karen Madsen).

and is unknown in other woody genera cultivated in the Arnold Arboretum. These opened capsules, moreover, persist on the shrubs into the winter months, adding to the landscape interest of the plants during that time of year.

To date, our plants from Shanghai have suffered no winter damage, and the fact that the original plants introduced by Wilson persisted in the Arboretum’s collections for twenty-five years suggests that Poliothyrsis is perfectly hardy in the Boston Basin. Its limits of hardiness and its potential as a landscape plant, however, have yet to be determined.

Poliothyrsis sinensis is currently available in the North American nursery trade from Woodlanders, Inc., 1128 Collecton Avenue, Aiken, South Carolina 29801; Glasshouseworks Greenhouses, P.O. Box 97, Stewart, Ohio 45778; and Heronswood Nursery, 7530 288th Street NE, Kingston, Washington 98346. And plans have been made to propagate the plants at the Arnold Arboretum and to make them available at a future Arboretum Plant Sale. As a consequence, this interesting Chinese species, easily propagated by seed and softwood cuttings, will undoubtedly find its way into the gardens of those who enjoy growing the curious and little known—in this instance a shrub that flowers and provides landscape interest at an unlikely time of year.

Initially lime green in color, the fruits mature to a light tan color before dehiscing to disclose the numerous, small, winged seeds produced within (Rász & Debreczy).

References


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Koller, G. L. Seven-Son Flower from Zhejiang: Introducing the Versatile Ornamental Shrub Heptacodium micromoides Airy Shaw. Arnoldia (1986) 46(4): 2–14. (Note: The correct name for this species is Heptacodium miconoides Rehder.)


Spongberg, S. A. Taxonomic Notes from the Arnold Arboretum. Arnoldia (1990) 50(3): 29–32. This article reports the change in name from Heptacodium tasminoides to H. miconoides.

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