

Arnold's Promise Fulfilled

James L. Jones

One of the roles of the Arnold Arboretum is to make worthy plants available to the gardening public, whether through cuttings workshops, the annual plant sale, direct requests to the propagators, or simply casual seed collection. An avid gardener reports on how these plants fare once they've left the grounds.

On a warm December day some twenty-five years ago I was strolling through the Arboretum when suddenly I found myself pelted by seeds. I traced the source to the bare branches of a twiggy, twelve-foot shrub and took some of the seeds home with me. This incident was brought back to me recently when, browsing through my garden records, I was struck by the number of plants I've acquired from the Arnold Arboretum. I've taken advantage of its plant offerings for nearly thirty years, long enough to get to know a number of trees, shrubs, and herbaceous perennials quite thoroughly. The following notes relate my experience with several of them, focusing chiefly on the success stories, but also including one or two interesting failures.

My garden is to the west of Boston and enjoys a zone 5B climate, with -10 degrees Fahrenheit a very rare occurrence and the all-time low over these thirty years of -13 degrees. The soil is a reasonably good, well-drained acidic loam. The sharp western wind has been tamed to some extent by a row of spruces. Fertilization and other soil amendments have been on the low end of standard. Except where noted, no special conditions have been provided.



The big, bold, and blocky Orica japonica on the grounds of the Arnold Arboretum.

Orixa japonica

It was this species that set my review in motion. The plant that resulted from those importunate seeds has proven valuable as either a hedge plant or a distinguished specimen, big, bold, and blocky. Its attractive properties include shapeliness, even after years of absent-minded hacking; glossy foliage that produces a pleasant scent when rubbed; and a useful habit of slow but steady suckering, offering a good number of offsets ready for instant use. My single specimen doesn't pester me with seeds, however,

since male and female flowers are borne on separate plants.

***Albizia julibrissin* 'Rosea'**

Starting trees from seed is usually a long-term venture—for instance, two of my other acquisitions, *Cornus florida* and *Cornus kousa*, both grown from seeds collected at the Arboretum, took a little over twenty years to flower after a 1970 sowing. An outstanding exception to this rule is *Albizia julibrissin* 'Rosea': mine went from seedling to flowering size in a mere seven years (1967–1974), reaching thirty feet in height before poor siting (too close to the house) forced me to cut it down. The next batch of self-sown seedlings, more appropriately placed, was already well underway and is now pushing the thirty-foot mark as well.

This tree has many things going for it besides quick growth: a graceful, spreading form; fragrant, fuzzy, pink flowers late in the summer; ferny foliage that admits dappled sunlight when mature but appears so late in the season that several cycles of early bloomers can run their course beneath the tree's bare branches. Those quickly spreading branches can be a liability—for instance, if the tree is placed right next to the house—and the blossoms are messy if they drop onto low-growing plants. I now have my albizias in a separate grove, with *Clerodendrum trichotomum* and chocolate mint (*Mentha* sp.) romping at their feet. Year by year I trim off the lower branches to get more of the airy effect I have in mind. I have had no problems with hardiness ('Rosea' is considered the most cold tolerant), although a plant protected by the house grew more swiftly than did one in the open; nor has the wilt disease seen in southern states been a problem in the Northeast.

Poncirus trifoliata

This small tree, the hardy orange, produces a crop of perfect little oranges chock full of seeds. Plants from seeds I acquired at the Arboretum grew the first few inches very quickly; then they remained almost static for several years. Eventually—1970 to 1987 in one case, 1982 to 1993 in another—they reached a height of some eight feet and began to put forth fragrant, citrus-like



The wickedly sharp thorns of Poncirus trifoliata as seen in April.

blossoms in May, with the fruits ripening in October if the summer has been warm. This last year a particularly heavy crop of fruit raised a pressing question: What to do with all those fruits? They *are* edible, though pithy and seedy and even more sour than lemon, with a bitter aftertaste. I once tried them in a chiffon pie, and though it wasn't bad I felt no real need for another. Instead I use the juice (in moderation) in a fruit salad, where it provides an excellent zing.

Placement of *Poncirus* (which can reach twelve feet) may be a problem, since the branches are heavily armed with long, stout, wickedly sharp thorns, and pruning is a hazardous undertaking. However, it is visually one of the better small trees around, never more so than when bedecked with its improbable orange globes. Like *Orixa*, another member of the rue family (Rutaceae), its leaves are glossy and aromatic.

Aesculus parviflora

The seeds of the buckeyes, including *Aesculus parviflora*, are immensely appealing. Back in 1980 I planted one from a large, spreading, suckering plant twenty feet high and forty feet across. I had those dimensions in mind when I



Aesculus parviflora with its spires of flowers photographed in August.

chose a spot for the resulting seedling, but since I was dealing in years compared to the Arboretum's decades, it soon became clear that a more prominent location could be risked. The plant was already three feet high with a root almost as long, but against the apparent odds it survived and flourished. Perhaps somewhat delayed by the setback of moving, it began flowering in May 1992 and is now a delightful twelve-foot tree, single-stemmed and showing no tendency to spread by suckers, though the occasional seedling will pop up. It deserves a prominent position, giving value in all seasons with spires of white flowers in summer, large pleated leaves that briefly turn a pleasant yellow in fall, and a spreading tree-like form that can be enhanced by removing lower limbs.

Acer palmatum

Fifteen years ago I gathered seeds from one of the smaller, redder cultivars of Japanese maple, motivated by the unquestionable charm of these trees as well as the high cost of plants. I have especially enjoyed the wide range of characteristics among the resulting specimens, from slow to vigorous and from red-leaved to green, with a one-hundred percent correlation between redness of leaf and slowness of growth. The tallest is now some twelve feet high, the shortest less than three feet. I early on placed the redder ones as accents in small garden areas (even then they were clearly slower growing) and positioned the taller, greener ones as individual specimens.

***Magnolia virginiana* 'Milton'**

I purchased *Magnolia virginiana* 'Milton' at the Arboretum's fall plant sale in September 1991, too recently to do more than report on its good health and pass on the advice someone else gave me: keep the plant in its pot (in a greenhouse or plunged in a coldframe) for at least a year before planting it out. Following that advice I succeeded with this plant where I had failed several times in the past. It will in time be a fifteen-foot tree with fragrant, relatively small white flowers. The 'Milton' cultivar is evergreen; at this stage, however, my plant hangs onto only a single leaf over the winter, with spring bringing a new covering of leaves. The leaves are smaller in all dimensions than those of *M. grandiflora*, better suited to dealing with the snow loads that can be the death of the larger species, even for those cultivars that are otherwise quite hardy.

Clerodendrum trichotomum

At the extreme of its range, the hardy glorybower is somewhere between a shrub and an herbaceous perennial, dying to the ground over winter but still sprouting and blooming the next summer. In fact, it is one of the most precise indicators of local climate I know: a fifteen-foot mini-tree in coastal Rhode Island; from zero to eight feet here west of Boston, depending on the severity of the winter; and a surefire winter casualty only a little to the north and west. Where growable, it is a wonderful plant, bearing fragrant, pale pink flowers in late summer fol-

lowed by eye-catching turquoise fruits surrounded by deep pink bracts. Have some care with the leaves, however; they stink when bruised.

I started my plants as cuttings in 1972. In general, I treat cuttings with a certain benign neglect, simply sticking a two-to-six-inch length in a sand and peat moss mix kept moist in a north-facing coldframe, without benefit of rooting hormone. Rooted cuttings are then kept in a coldframe or greenhouse, depending on species and degree of root development, until the following season. My *C. trichotomum* plants first bloomed in 1982 and grew to eight feet after several relatively mild winters. The harsh winter of 1993–1994 cut all but one plant to the ground,



The fragrant late-summer flower clusters of *Clerodendrum trichotomum*.

but all survived to flower again. For nice late-summer effects I grow the glorybower with the albizias in one area and with *Heptacodium miconioides* in another.

Cotoneaster divaricatus

A cutting nurtured as another species eventually proved to be *Cotoneaster divaricatus*, a big, unkempt plant I would never have consciously invited into the garden. But by then I had moved it here and there, pruned it as necessary, and discovered that it made an excellent two-dimensional hedge, six feet high and little more than a

branch thick, yet rigidly upright. The initial cutting was taken in 1980; within eight years suckers and self-sown seedlings had yielded enough material for a space-saving screen around a nursery area, spangled in late summer and fall with a generous helping of red berries.

***Euonymus hamiltonianus* ssp. *sieboldianus* (*E. yedoensis*)**

This was another mistake, irremediable this time. It seemed to be just what I had in mind when I saw it in the Arboretum, a small tree of interesting shape that would provide light shade and a properly sized vertical accent for a garden I was developing. Seeds sown in 1977 came along nicely, the resulting seedlings becoming large enough to be put in place about seven years later. After another seven years they were unceremoniously ripped out as their multitude of faults became apparent: susceptibility to insect attack (especially tent caterpillars) and aggressive seeding and suckering, not to mention a contorted, lopsided shape.

Lonicera fragrantissima

This is a plant I requested from the Arboretum, having a need for something that bloomed early and sweetly. The cuttings I received rooted easily, but the plant turned out to be much too large and vigorous for the intended space, which was a sunhouse (a greenhouse heated by sun alone). I moved it to the front entrance of the house where, seven years later at a height of five feet, it began perfuming the April air with its heady fragrance. Its growth should be controlled by sharp pruning, since the basic form is awkward, somewhere between a shrub and a vine, with branches jutting out in all directions. It increases by suckers at a reasonable rate. It is almost evergreen, the foliage remaining in good condition through most of January. The thoughtful gardener will position it near a sidewalk as a kindness to passersby at a time of year when a bit of fragrance is sorely needed.

Mahonia japonica

I acquired *Mahonia japonica* as a cutting in 1980, and its long sprays of coarsely toothed evergreen leaves make it one of the most attractive plants in my garden. It is hardy where the

western native, *M. aquifolium*, is not, and if it is protected from the winter wind, the cold will not scar its foliage. It grows quite rapidly to about six feet, with a narrower spread. In April of a very good year it bears fragrant yellow flowers, although they are usually destroyed by the cold. With just the least protection—as in a sunhouse—it may begin blooming in December and carry on right through the winter. However, the foliage is quite exceptional enough without flowers. Cuttings root with the greatest ease; I simply stick them in the ground in the spring on the north side of my house.

Paeonia suffruticosa

Tree peonies are very slow to grow from seed, requiring two years just to germinate, but the results can be spectacular. My original seed was sown in 1982; the resulting plant flowered in May 1989—a huge, sumptuous white flower held proudly erect, reminiscent of photos of

miss his special warmth and quality of character as well as the encyclopedic knowledge of the natural world that he so readily shared with all. For the past seventeen years, Buzzy made the Arboretum his primary outdoor studio and classroom, developing many deep friendships. He had been a sanctuary director and educator for the Massachusetts Audubon Society for twenty-seven years before, as he used to say, he was "granted an honorable dismissal, having qualified chronologically."

In 1978 he and his wife, Flora Quirin, moved to Jamaica Plain—during the infamous February blizzard—and he "was recycled instead of retired." As the Arboretum's preeminent docent, Buzzy enthralled thousands of visitors as well as staff on his walks, which encompassed not just botany but the total natural

Buzzy, observant of words and grammatical, could worry that involved sent have no endir crashed throu dramatic and save the day."

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The extravagant flower of Paeonia suffruticosa, photographed at the Arnold Arboretum in mid-May.

P. suffruticosa 'Joseph Rock' but with a center that's yellow rather than purple. Tree peonies require care in placement because of their overwhelming (if brief) springtime presence and the dowdiness of their bare stems in winter. I addressed both concerns by draping one with *Rhododendron* 'Blue Peter', low growing enough that the peony flowers poke through, large-flowered enough to hold its own and, of course, flowering at the same time. When the embrace of the rhododendron became too smothering, simple pruning set things right again. High shade is another matter, the peonies being quite tolerant of it.

Telekia speciosa

Even herbaceous perennials require a year or two of care before being put into the open garden. Mine go into a nursery bed where they can be carefully watered and monitored. The soil there is somewhat improved by the addition of leafmold.

Though *Telekia* is indeed a herbaceous perennial, I found that it developed with almost tree-like slowness, not flowering until July 1990 though I acquired it in 1985. It was worth the wait, with golden yellow flowers four inches in diameter. Like the better known *Ligularia*, *Telekia* is a shade-requiring member of the composite family. It stands equally as tall, two-and-a-half to three feet, but has majestically large leaves that form a massive clump and flowers of a gentler shade of yellow. Like *Ligularia* it will droop under direct sun and yet needs good light to flourish. And flourish it will under the right conditions—one gardener reports that it becomes rampant when grown in high shade and with even moisture. It flowers at the same time as *Rhododendron maximum*, and the pair add a surprising flash of color to the shady summer garden. *Telekia* can readily be grown from seed, but as with many composites the seed must not be sown right away. I suggest storing it until fall in a place protected from sun and rain.

Indigofera pseudotinctoria

Indigofera is a good example of the plants sent by the Arboretum to its members—little known but with great garden potential. It is an eight-inch-high subshrub that bears a scattering of

pink pea flowers from July to September. Mine arrived in 1986 and began flowering a year later. It makes an excellent groundcover in a sunny spot, shapely and not overly aggressive, having spread to only a square yard in seven years. I use it at the base of box (*Buxus sempervirens* 'Vardar Valley') for a well controlled, slightly formal effect. Offsets can be detached for transplantation.

Cassia marilandica

Our native senna is an excellent garden plant, shrublike in appearance, arching to four-and-a-half feet over the summer but dying to the ground each winter, with attractive pinnate foliage and pleasant pea flowers of a subdued yellow in July. It would fit in very well with clumping grasses in a mannered meadow garden. It sets plentiful seed, and I have had germination with sowing; I have seen no self-sowing although others have found it almost too prolific. I purchased my plant in 1988 and had my first flowers two years later. Senna can be divided before growth starts in spring, which gives a lot of leeway, since it is one of the latest plants to begin seasonal growth. For maximum drama I combine it with *Macleaya cordata*, the two of them giving massive cover where only bare ground had been brief months before.

Clematis recta

I had been unsuccessful in my attempts to raise nonvining clematis from seed, so I was entirely

receptive when my *C. recta* cutting (a plant dividend) arrived in the mail. The resulting plant has not been disappointing, though not wildly exciting either. It shares the shrublike though herbaceous quality of the *Cassia marilandica*, but instead of having a dignified upright stance, it sprawls, making placement a good deal more difficult. However, its abundant white flowers in June are showy, and the foliage is distinctive and attractive. I grow one in a sunken area where a two-and-a-half foot high retaining wall forces it into a semblance of tidiness and another behind a sturdy *Buxus sempervirens* 'Vardar Valley'. It is three feet high and equally broad. It would probably do better in a larger garden where it could billow to its heart's content.

As my plant records make clear, serendipitous gardening of the sort I practice can succeed if the gardener is willing to experiment, to learn from failures, to continue working with plants until a satisfactory effect is achieved. Experience with my Arnold Arboretum acquisitions has demonstrated that many happy surprises are in store for the gardener who goes beyond the tried-and-true and gives garden space to some of the lesser known species and varieties.

Jim Jones is a gardener of wide-ranging interests with a special fascination for the obscure. At present he is president of the North American Rock Garden Society.