

The Sweet Smell of Spring: *Abelia mosanensis*

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Someday I really want to publish a scratch-and-sniff issue of *Arnoldia*, providing a “by the nose” tour of the Arnold Arboretum. I’d probably skip the less pleasant odors—skunk cabbage, ripe ginkgo cones, the stinkhorn fungi that pop up in mulched planting beds—in favor of the many truly wonderful scents to be found here. While pleasant fragrances occur from winter (e.g., the flowers of *Hamamelis mollis* ‘Princeton Gold’) through autumn (e.g., falling *Cercidiphyllum japonicum* leaves), the floral explosion from mid-spring to early summer brings the peak sniffing season.

Come May, there are plenty of sweet-smelling flowers to stick my nose into but my current favorite is the aptly named fragrant abelia (*Abelia mosanensis*). This deciduous abelia is less well known than glossy abelia (*Abelia × grandiflora*), an evergreen or semi-evergreen hybrid species that, with its many cultivars, is a popular landscape plant, particularly in the southeastern quarter of the United States. Fragrant abelia is a somewhat rangy shrub, forming a loose mound of slender, arching stems and reaching a height of 4 to 6 feet (1.2 to 1.8 meters), possibly taller, with an equal or slightly greater width. Its bright green, ovate leaves often have a bronze or reddish tint when emerging. Some sources claim that fragrant abelia has showy red-orange autumn foliage, but specimens at the Arboretum have turned pinkish brown at best.

Fragrant abelia blooms in May to early June at the Arboretum. Flowers are borne in short terminal panicles. The flower buds are rich reddish pink and open to white, funnellform flowers with 5-lobed corollas. The obovate sepals often have an attractive pink tint and persist long after the flowers fall. The fruit is a leathery achene topped by the persistent sepals. But back to the flowers. They are marvelously fragrant, but it’s difficult to put into words exactly what the fragrance is (this is where I need that scratch-and-sniff feature). References variously

compare the fragrance to lilacs, lilies, hyacinths, and Korean spice viburnum (*Viburnum carlesii*). I think I’d go with the best-scented common lilac (*Syringa vulgaris*), maybe ‘President Lincoln’, plus a hint of orange blossom, a drop of lily-of-the-valley (*Convallaria majalis*), and a shot of tropical fruit.

The Arboretum has a limited history with *Abelia mosanensis*. The species is native to Korea but was not collected by Ernest Henry Wilson on his expeditions there (in fact, the species name was not published until 1926, eight years after Wilson’s last visit to Korea). During an October 1977 plant collecting expedition to South Korea, Arboretum botanists Steven Spongberg and Richard Weaver collected *Abelia mosanensis* seeds in the Seoul National University Forest near Kwangyang in Cholla-Namdo Province. Arboretum greenhouse records indicate that the seeds were sown but there was no germination. We currently have three specimens of fragrant abelia at the Arboretum, all growing in the Leventritt Shrub and Vine Garden. There are two individuals of accession 282-2003, which were purchased as container-grown plants from Spring Meadow Nursery in 2003. There is one plant of accession 591-2003, which was grown from seeds received from the Academy of Science in Salaspils, Latvia. The seeds were offered in the Academy’s Index Seminum (seed exchange list) and were collected from cultivated plants growing at a garden in Latvia.

Fragrant abelia is available from a number of commercial sources. It is considered cold hardy through USDA zone 5 (average annual minimum temperature -20 to -10°F [-28.9 to -23.3°C]) and grows best in full sun or partial shade and moist, fertile, somewhat acidic soil. Though perhaps not the tidiest or most handsome of shrubs, it is worth growing just for the delicious fragrance of its flowers.

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