

# *Chimonanthus praecox*: A Redolence of China

David Yih

**O**n a raw, wintery day last February, I traveled from Connecticut to visit the Arnold Arboretum, impelled by curiosity. In 1977, my father, at the behest of the poet Donald Hall, had written a series of vignettes for *The Ohio Review* recalling the China he had left more than thirty years earlier. Among these was a nostalgic essay in which he sought to convey a feeling for Chinese esthetics as exemplified by *Chimonanthus praecox*, known in China as *la mei*. Its English common name, wintersweet, encapsulates two notable features of the plant: its membership in that small fraternity of temperate shrubs that bloom in winter and the remarkable fragrance of its flowers. I had recently learned that a specimen grew at the Arboretum and wanted to experience this fragrance for myself.

No account of wintersweet fails to mention the scent of its blossoms. But, as my father's essay points out, the resources of the English language are scarcely adequate to describe the smell of flowers. His attempt begins by contrasting wintersweet with gardenia, orange, and locust, whose scents "have something sensual in them that makes you feel restless, as if there were something missing in your life." The wintersweet's fragrance is something "entirely different, because it is ethereal, spiritual, otherworldly." This distinctive scent had set off a Proustian tumult of memories when my father happened to visit a botanical garden while living in Geneva, in 1964:

"As I wandered about I suddenly smelled a remembered fragrance ... In the tepid sun and the breeze, I suddenly recalled my grandfather's house with its two wintersweet trees, my middle school in Soochow with its ancient garden, and the hills of the Chia-ling River. My mind was drunk with memories of people who had gone out of my life and of sceneries I should in all likelihood never see again."

*Chimonanthus* belongs to Calycanthaceae, a small family whose members are found primarily in East Asia and North America. Endemic to montane forests in China, *Chi-*

*monanthus praecox* has been cultivated for over a thousand years. A great number of cultivated varieties exist in China, where it is grown as a garden shrub, a potted plant, and for flower arrangements. When the Sung dynasty poet Huang T'ing-chien composed a poem in praise of *la mei*, the plant attained instant fame and popularity in the capital, Kaifeng. Fan Chengda included it in his botanical treatise, *Fancun meipu* (Fan-Village plum register), circa 1186. According to the custom of associating a plant with each month of the lunar calendar, *la mei* is the flower of the twelfth month; its blooming thus coincides with the Chinese New Year.

The Arnold Arboretum's lone specimen (accession 236-98) was grown from seeds received from a botanical garden in Belgium. Wintersweet is marginally cold hardy in USDA Zone 6 (average annual minimum temperature 0 to -10°F [-17.8 to -23.3°C]), so the plant was carefully sited in a protected microclimate on the south side of Bussey Hill. In colder winters flower buds may be damaged or killed, but in good years the hardy visitor who ventures into the Explorers Garden in January will come upon the pendant, waxy yellow blossoms picturesquely scattered along leafless branches and find the air charged with the heady scent for which the plant is known.

The chemical components of wintersweet's fragrance are under intensive study in Asia, where as many as 161 compounds have been identified in the scent. Little wonder, then, that opinions vary as to how best to describe it. Last winter, the Arboretum's *Chimonanthus* struggled to bloom in freezing temperatures, but my companions and I did find many plump, globose flower buds and a few open flowers to sniff. Among our varied reactions: spicy, minty; like hyacinth or mock-orange; like a steaming cup of jasmine tea—welcome sensations on a chilly day in the dead of winter.

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